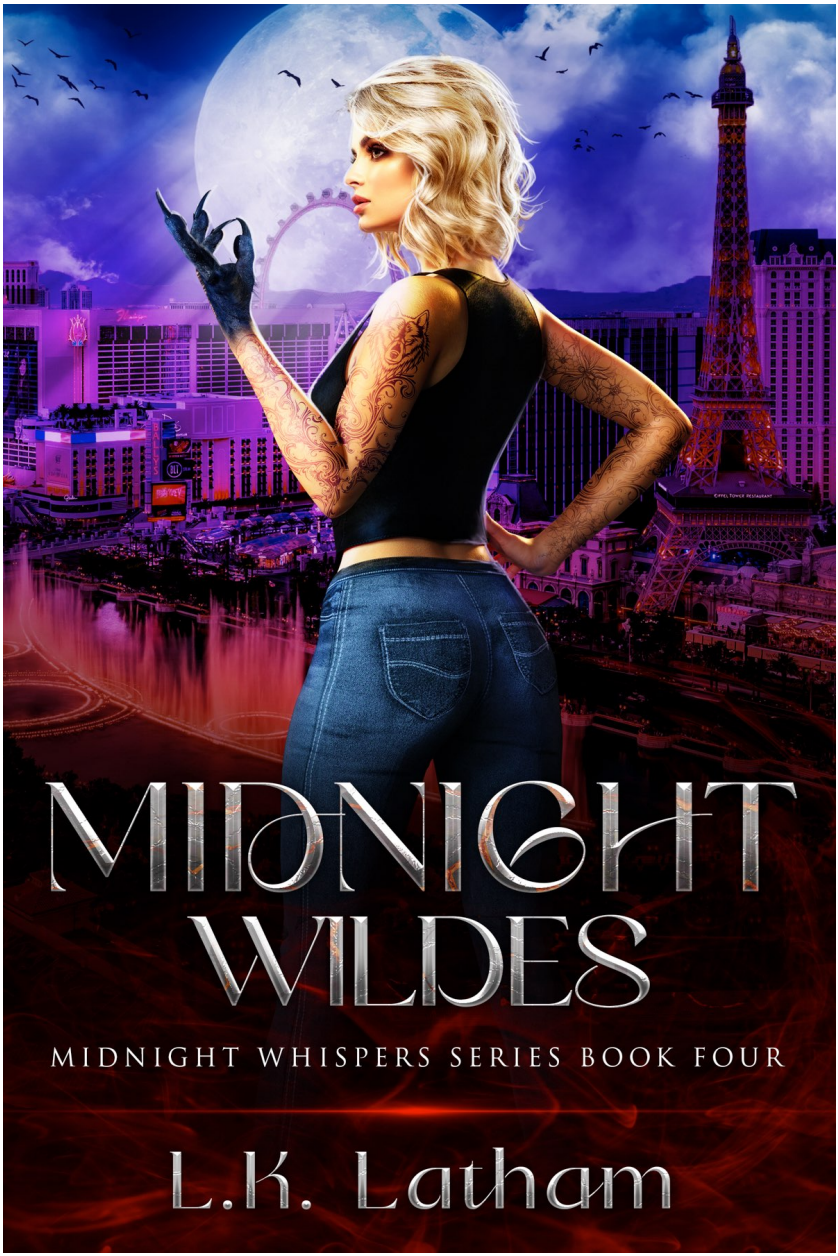

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Midnight Wildes

Midnight Whispers
Book Four

L. K. Latham

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Thank you to everyone who said, “What happened next?”

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CHAPTER 1
BEFORE THE ATTACK

Standing outside St. Gaetano High School in Las Vegas, Nevada, a strange man runs his gloved hand along the sleek curve of the hood of a fully restored and modified 1928 emerald green Cadillac and occasionally glances at the entrance to the school. He's not strange as in hold-your-children-close- or check-your-wallet- or even call-the-police-strange. This man's smile makes all faces that turn to him smile. Straight, white teeth gleam in the afternoon sun, and pale lips glisten like golden cords. Catch his eye, and the deep, still ponds in his eyes will wink and laugh and demand you laugh, too.

The forest green of his jacket glitters as though made of green gold. Even his skin, at a glance tan and coarse, shifts to summer green and back again. And if caught unawares, his long, hooked nose glitters with gold rings dangling over lips, pierced with rings of gold.

But none of these things make this man, Teaser, strange—not even when he speaks with the fluid cadence of a long-forgotten song or whispers strange words to no one you can see. What makes him strange is that so few people recognize him for the Goblin he is.

Isabella & Eugene

Eugene's stomach grumbled louder than the wheels of the plane on the tarmac. She kept her eyes closed, her knees tucked close under her chin, and her head tucked under the pillow.

Isabella's voice, so soft and comforting, whispered, "Flight's over, Eugene. We're on the ground."

Eugene lifted her head enough for her voice to escape the comfort of her cocoon. "We're still moving."

"Because we're being pulled into the hangar," Isabella answered.

Eugene peeked out the window as she eased up its screen. "Good."

She unwound her long, thin body to stand and stretch, twisting to avoid her head hitting the ceiling of the jet. As Eugene tugged her vest, buttoning the top button that constantly popped open, she stuck her tongue out at Isabella, who stared at her tattoos.

"If you like the tats so much, I'm sure Mums can fit you in for a session next time she's in Austin."

"Your mum's work is incredible," Isabella said. "Not sure how tats work on Vamps. Cesar, you got any tats?"

"No," said Cesar from where he stood in the aisle.

Eugene made her way past him and CC to the exit.

"Okay, Eugene?" asked CC.

Eugene spun to look at CC, who smiled from her chair as she brushed her bright red hair.

"What?" Eugene asked as she dashed up the aisle to stand next to CC. "Yes, why? You okay?"

CC cleared her throat. "I'm good. Still sorry we flew?"

Eugene walked to the other end of the plane, past a laughing Isabella and Ramon, sitting in the last row, as usual, and not smiling. Then, she turned and walked back to the front.

"Flying's not natural."

"Come sit by me, Eugene," said CC. "It may be a while before we can get off the plane."

Eugene's head snapped around so quickly her neck almost cracked. "Why? What's wrong?"

"Relax," said Cesar. He moved to stand next to her and put his hand on her shoulder. "It can take a while to taxi to the hangar. All depends on how busy the airport is."

“Oh,” said Eugene. She returned to pacing.

Cesar asked Isabella, “You good?”

“Beats flying commercial any day,” she said. “Wish I could always fly this way.”

Cesar grinned. “You fly a lot, do you?”

Isabella shrugged. “Nah, but if I could fly like this, I might.”

Eugene, now standing by the front door, grumbled, “Not natural to fly.”

Her foot tapped and tapped as she waited for the door to open. She wiped the sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand, then looked at Cesar as he sat next to CC.

“You know,” he began. “You could have opened the screen to see the Strip from the air. The pilot flew in low just so you could.”

“Oh,” said CC. “Well, it didn’t seem polite with you—all of you—on the plane.” She craned her neck to look at Eugene and lowered her voice before adding, “And I’m not sure she could handle seeing how high we were.”

“You know I can hear you, right?” Eugene said.

Isabella smirked. “We can all hear you, CC.”

Cesar shrugged. “I wouldn’t have gotten on the plane if I were hungry.”

“Ditto,” said Isabella.

“When are we going to stop?” moaned Eugene.

As if on cue, the rumbling of the plane's tires stopped and the pilot’s voice broke into the cabin over the speakers. “We’ve arrived, Mr. De La Rosa. Ralph will be out to open the hatch as soon as the hangar doors are closed. It was a pleasure flying you and your party to Las Vegas. Remember to call Midnight Air for all your traveling needs.”

“Finally,” Eugene muttered as Ralph approached and moved her away from the hatch.

“You’re in the lead,” said Isabella, swinging her backpack over her shoulder. “Cesar?”

Cesar offered CC his hand as she stepped into the aisle. The

overhead light flashed, catching the green of her eyes. They sparkled like water in the sun, but what made them truly special was that they allowed CC to see inside people: their true selves. Eugene smiled, remembering when CC looked inside her. It was freaky, so she resisted the urge to laugh at Isabella, who went to great lengths to avoid being in CC's direct line of sight.

"I've never met a Witch before," CC said as she reached for her handbag. "At least, not that I'm aware of."

"I haven't met Mrs. Smith," Cesar said.

"She's okay," Eugene said as Ralph finally made it to the hatch and opened it. "A little scary, but okay. Then again, I've only met her a couple of times, and the last time was just after the incident."

Isabella laughed. "Only in Vegas could a Wolf run down the street and everybody applaud."

"I might not have gotten in trouble if the pics hadn't gone viral," said Eugene. "And I still don't know why I got in so much trouble. Nobody knew it was me, and I was chasing a child killer."

"Really?" asked Isabella. "Never heard the why for you doing what you did. Good for you. Hope you ripped him to shreds."

"Let's not repeat the incident on this trip," said Cesar said with a sharp, glance at Eugene.

"Jeez," Eugene muttered, heat flashed across her face. "Give me a little credit."

CC cleared her throat. "Suppose we'll have to put on a show."

"Show?" Cesar asked.

"You know," CC said. "Like they do in all the mafia movies: kissing hands and all that. Kind of like you did when Max moved to Austin. You'll want to prove to everyone who the boss is."

Isabella and Eugene both laughed so hard they had to put their hand on their stomachs.

Cesar scoffed. "I wish you'd stop saying things like that. Someone might take you seriously and get the wrong impression."

Isabella, still laughing, added, "You know, you do remind me a bit of Lucky."

“Did you really know Lucky?” Eugene asked.

“Be serious,” grumbled Cesar. “Listen up everyone. CC, you go after Eugene, please. Then Isabella. Ramon, behind me.”

Eugene winked at Isabella, then leaped out of the hatch and down the steps as soon as Ralph moved out of her way.

Standing on the last step, she heard CC say, “Cesar, someone’s wearing a fedora. Someone’s kissing someone’s ring tonight.”

Isabella added, “Why do I always forget about you, Ramon? But then, you like that, don’t you? Too quiet for my taste, but the hat looks good on you.”

Isabella stopped on the step next to CC, who’d stopped two steps behind Eugene to be able to see over her head. A broad man in a dark suit and a wide-brimmed hat stood in front of five men and two women in jeans and jackets of leather and chains. They did their best to look frightening.

Isabella sniffed the air and smirked as she whispered in CC’s ear, “Werewolves, and not happy to be here. But not the big guy. There's something familiar about him: very earthy and old, but I can’t put my finger on it.”

“Wolves,” CC began, then stopped as a young man with golden hair and equally sparkling gold chains around his neck moved forward.

Isabella smirked as Cesar stepped out of the plane, and the man moved faster to meet him. The Vamp removed his fedora, pushing back a thick lock of hair. He looked good, and very Vegas, but he’d worked for the old boss, like just about all the Vamps in Vegas did, and the old boss was a bad guy. Just because the bad guy was dead didn’t mean this one had turned good.

“Cesar,” he said with a nod. “I’m Wayne. Good to finally meet you. I’ll drive you to the hotel. I’m afraid Mrs. Smith couldn’t make it tonight.”

Ice trickled down Isabella’s spine as a flash of anger slid off Cesar, but as quickly as Cesar’s anger slithered against her, it disappeared.

“She’s a busy woman,” Cesar said. “I can appreciate the difficulty in keeping up with a city the size of Vegas.”

A deep grumble—like a rock sliding down a dirt path—issued from the large man in the wide-brimmed hat.

Wayne jerked his head toward the man. “This is Jonesy, one of Mrs. Smith’s associates.”

“Welcome to Las Vegas, Mr. De LaRosa,” said Jonesy. “Mrs. Smith asked me to meet you and apologize for not being here herself. She was certain you would understand.”

Cesar gripped the man’s hand, but Isabella studied Jonesy’s eyes. They were dark, almost black, but with a sprinkling of green…or blue…or was it gold? They were as familiar as the rumbling of his voice. She twisted her lips, searching her memories for everyone she once knew in Vegas, but something was off.

Cesar glanced behind the broad man. “And your friends?”

“The Wolves are contracted for most of our casino security. They’re here to ensure nothing disrupts your arrival.” His voice dropped two octaves until it growled like gravel on a busy street. His lips twitched as he fixed his gaze on Eugene. “I was surprised to hear you were coming, young Wolf.”

Eugene’s shoulders rose just a fraction, but when Cesar shook his head, they returned to their usual slouch and lifted the corner of her mouth into a smirk.

“I was asked to come…specifically.”

Isabella smiled. Eugene wasn’t as flaky as the average Wolf.

“Hmm, yes, yes.” Jonesy nodded to CC next. “Ms. Carson, it’s an honor to meet you." He pulled a black, velvet covered box out of his breast pocket and offered it to her. “Mrs. Smith asked me to give you this.”

Eugene reached out and took the box before CC could reach it. CC opened her mouth to object as Eugene opened the box and pulled out a small, gold key hanging from a thin, gold chain.

Jonesy bowed his head toward Cesar. “A key to the High Meadow Casino. This will allow Ms. Carson complete access. I

assure you, it was given with only good intentions." He turned to Eugene and nodded. "You've grown, Wolf."

Eugene tossed the key to Isabella, who examined it briefly. It was cold and light; it felt like a gold key should. She shrugged and handed it to Cesar.

Jonesy offered his arm to CC. "I look forward to speaking with you, Ms. Carson. I've heard much about you."

CC glanced at Cesar before placing her hand on Jonesy's arm. Together they strolled toward a shining black limo to their right and away from the Wolves, with heads close, whispering about weather and Vegas, and sand and stone. Isabella squinted as Jonesy glowed for the briefest of moments. It was as though a blue light with hints of purple—or maybe pink—floated out of every pore on his body. She grinned, remembering his other name and his other face.

As the limo door closed and Isabella moved to sit in front with Wayne, Cesar handed CC the gold key and said, "Never accept a gift from a Witch."

CC held up the thin chain letting the little key dangle in front of her. "I thought you said Goblins were the tricksters."

Cesar smiled. "We all are."

Eugene said, "Jonesy's kind of a Goblin and a Wizard."

Isabella turned toward the back seat. "Back in the day, we called him Frances. She was a looker. I always liked her. Oh—guess I should say he now. Goblins! Gotta love 'em."

CC asked, "What's the difference between a Wizard and a Witch?"

"Witches are born Witches," Eugene said, pulling the bar door open and grabbing a bottle of water. "Wizards have to learn to be Wizards, or so I've heard." She gulped down half the bottle in one go. "Oh, and only girls are Witches."

"Oh," said CC.

"We used to have the security contract with Mrs. Smith's casino." Wayne started the engine and drove out of the hangar, all

while staring at Cesar in the rearview mirror. “Is that why you're here?”

“Just drive,” Ramon said as he closed the window between the front and the back of the car.

Isabella shrugged when Wayne’s mouth formed a tight, straight line and glared at her.

“Don’t look at me. I’m only security,” she said with a wink. As they drove through the airport gates, she touched his shoulder. “Cesar doesn’t keep secrets unless he has to. He’ll tell you what’s up when he can.”

TEASER

Teaser drove away from the school, turning right instead of left, the direct route home, at the intersection.

“But you wished to clobber his nose until it turned into a mostly mushy mess, did you not?” Teaser asked the reflection of his charges, the twins, in the rear-view mirror.

Ari slouched, staring at his feet, his lips pursed into a line so tight they’d turned white.

Arika, arms crossed over her chest, stared at the reflection of Teaser’s eyes, bottom lip pouting. “That’s not a fair question, Teaser.”

“Exactly,” added Ari. “Wanting a thing and doing a thing are two different things.”

Teaser smiled as he continued down the suburban street. “And what in our lessons have I said about wanting things with such fierceness and righteousness that you see red?”

Arika glared at Teaser. The faintest blush rushed to her cheeks as she sighed and turned to stare out the window. “They have a tendency to happen.”

Ari stared out his own window. “We both wanted to slug him, Arika. No denying it.” He returned his gaze to the rearview mirror. “But we didn’t do it. I don’t know how Maverick’s nose got broken.

I promise."

"We promise," added Arika. Teaser pointed his finger at their reflection, but before he could say anything, she pounded her fists into the seat cushions. "We don't owe you any type of explanation! We've told you we didn't do it." Her voice cracked, unable to be truly angry at Teaser. "Stop trying to convince me I did anything wrong!"

Teaser shook his head. "I did not say you did. I only asked if you wanted to."

"Argh!" Arika's face burned bright red, and her mouth tensed until it looked as if she had only one thin lip. She crossed and recrossed her arms and let out a loud huff. "Whatever. All this means is we're not going to get our party." She held her hand up to interrupt Ari, who'd opened his mouth to speak. "Not another word, Ari. You know it's going to be all my fault, and I didn't even take a swing at him…even though I really wanted to."

Ari shook his head. "You're right about the party, but Aunt Ricia will blame me. She blames me for everything."

Teaser turned onto the Strip filled with midday traffic. Tourists crowded the sidewalks, taxi drivers honked their horns at pedestrians, and music blared from the bars.

"In case you do not notice," said Teaser, "I take an oblique route for our homeward journey."

Ari grunted and wiped his nose with the back of his hand while staring at his feet. Arika's head and shoulders drooped as she picked at dust on her skirt. She sniffed and sighed.

"I'm sorry, Ari. It's my fault we aren't getting our party. I so wanted to slug that stuck-up, son of a slug."

"I get it." Ari's voice was only loud enough to be heard over the blaring of the horn from the cab next to them. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders as a tear fell from Arika's right eye. "I wanted to slug him, too."

Teaser raised an eyebrow and twisted around briefly to look at them. "Perhaps you will honor me now with a precise description of

this afternoon's misadventure."

The twins looked up, and together they said, "Sorry, Teaser."

Arika rolled her shoulders back and leaned close to Teaser's ear. "I was walking Margie to physics class. She can't go very fast with her crutches even though she's been using them for like two weeks. You'd think she'd have figured it out by now. Anyway, Eddie came with us to carry our bags. He has such a crush on Margie, but she's oblivious to it. Maverick and his friends were coming out of the chem lab. He's been furious with me since I beat him for the physics award last year. He called out to Margie that she better hop along and not hold up everyone in the hall. As if it's her fault she broke her leg falling off the high dive! I told Margie to ignore him, but then he pushed Eddie into her and made them both fall. Maverick and his friends just stood there, laughing."

Ari, straightening to his full height, leaned forward. "She's telling the truth. I saw the whole thing on my way to math class. It made my blood boil."

"And," added Arika, "as Eddie was falling, I reached out to help, but his bag got caught on the strap of mine and ripped it open. My bottle of soda fell out of its pocket. I suppose the top wasn't as tight as it should have been, because it popped off. Cola fizzed out all over the front of my blouse! I had to put on this T-shirt. Mr. Carnarvon said it was indecent of me to be wearing a wet shirt, which I thought was a stupid thing to complain about seeing as how I didn't pick the school uniform or ask anyone to pour cola all over me, and I don't see what any of this has to do with Maverick getting a broken nose."

Teaser nodded but said nothing until the twins leaned back in their seats. "A most unfortunate set of occurrences. When I spoke to the principal of your fine school, he said the surveillance footage from the hallway supports your version of events. You did not slug Maverick, which he found most perplexing, as he now must explain a broken nose to the parents of Maverick. However, my initial question has yet to be answered directly and with the honesty that I

ask of you two. You each wanted to hit Maverick in the nose, did you not?"

Arika tugged at the hem of her T-shirt. Her lips loosened, and with a shrug, she lifted her head and said, "Yes. I wanted to club him in the nose."

Teaser nodded. "And you, Ari?"

Ari, staring at his feet again, nodded. "Yes, Teaser. I wanted to crush that pompous nose of his."

"Excellent!" Teaser shouted as he turned off the Strip and toward the center of the city. "Understanding our wants and desires is half the battle to understanding our actions. When we get home, make yourselves scarce. Perhaps you will avail of Jonesy extra time to practice your physical skills of control and defense. It is, most appropriately, on your afternoon's agenda. He will appreciate extra time with you. I will clear all this with your dear aunt. It is I, you may have surmised, that spoke with Mr. Canarvon. Your aunt is only aware that I retrieved you from your school earlier than normal today."

"Teaser!" the twins shouted as Arika wrapped her arms around Teaser's neck and Ari gripped his shoulders. "Thank you! You're the best!"

"I don't know what we'd do without you," Ari added as they both settled back, smiling and looking out the windows as the car sped up.

"But," said Teaser, raising a warning finger, "be on your best behavior. Do not be late for your lesson, and ask for your extra time with heartfelt appreciation. Thank Jonesy with the earnestness he deserves."

"Yes, Teaser," the twins said in unison.

Arika looked at Ari. "Thanks for the use of the T-shirt." She burst into giggles. "Margie says when you wear it, it brings out the blue in your eyes."

Ari nodded. "Aunt Ricia doesn't like it, but it passes muster for gym class. I don't like Margie that way."

Arika nodded. “You know, I’m not sure why we’re worried. Aunt Ricia will be too otherwise encumbered with business to notice a note from Canarvon. And I told Margie you didn’t like her that way, but she’s such a child. She still believes in fairies and Prince Charming and dragons."

Teaser couldn’t stop the smirk from forming on his lips as whispered, “And now you two owe me another favor.”

TEASER SNUCK into the private gymnasium and sat in the chair near the door. As predicted, his employer was too busy to discuss the twins. He leaned back in the chair, balancing on the chair’s back legs as he watched Jonesy, his oldest and dearest of friends, teach their charges.

He fell off his chair, as Jonesy yelled, “No, no, no, Arika! How many times have I told you to keep your right arm up and level with your shoulder?” He moved Ari to stand in front of Arika and lifted her arm a half an inch higher. “Like this. It’s parallel to the ground, and the ball is in your hand. Your arm will swing up and toss the ball.”

“Argh!” spat Arika. “There is no ball in my hand. I’m not throwing anything.”

Ari shrugged his shoulders. “You’re supposed to imagine the ball.”

Arika put her hands on her hips. “None of this makes sense. Are we doing yoga, karate, or learning physics? You’re supposed to be a tutor, - not a torturer.”

Jonesy turned and stalked away from the twins.

“Now you’ve done it,” Ari growled. “He’s walking out.”

“Oh,” cried Arika. Her eyes swelled into large, round disks as her mouth frowned. “I just want to know why? Jonesy! Please don’t leave angry. I want to do this right.”

Jonesy spun around to face the twins, his eyes glaring like a

burnt sky. “Why did you get so angry this afternoon at school?”

Arika stared back as hard at Jonesy as he did at them. “Maverick was being a…well, you know. It was mean of him to treat Margie the way he did. It was even meaner to push Eddie like he did.”

Jonesy turned his gaze to Ari. “And you?”

Ari looked at the floor. “I didn’t like the way he looked at Arika.”

Arika’s mouth fell open, and she turned to Ari. “How did he look at me?”

“Well,” Ari started as he looked at his feet. “You were swinging your physics metal around the way you always do when Maverick’s around.”

“Do I?”

“Yes, you always do.”

Arika squinted, looking at nothing. “I didn’t realize. Rude, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but then he’s always showing up when you’re around, too.”

Jonesy shook his head. “How do either of you expect to live the lives you should if you keep letting pride and anger impede your reasoning and your moral, judicial, and political decisions?”

Ari and Arika both furrowed their eyebrows, saying nothing. Jonesy continued. “You are heirs to an old family long known for generosity and fairness. Will you be the ones to break that tradition allowing your petty jealousies to rule your actions and your words?” He pointed his finger at Arika. “How many times have you reminded Maverick of your superior knowledge of sciences and mathematics?” He turned to Ari, whose shoulders immediately slumped. “How many times have you done what you know is wrong just because your sister is doing it?”

Arika’s hands balled into fists. “That’s not fair…..”

“No!” Jonesy shouted. He grabbed a towel and wiped the sweat off his brow. “How many times have I warned you against exposing yourselves? You’re almost fifteen years old. It’s time both of you

started acting like the young adults you want so much to be. You want your aunt to give you everything you think you deserve, but you'll get nothing until I see you take responsibility for your actions. Nothing!"

Jonesy turned and stomped his feet across the gym to the exit.

Before he reached the door, Teaser met him with a smile, holding his arms open.

"What is all of this noise?" he asked, shaking his head.

"I'm done," muttered Jonesy. "I can't do it anymore. They won't learn."

"That's not fair!" the twins shouted in unison.

"We just want to know why," said Arika.

"Is that too much to ask?" asked Ari.

"Why do these things work the way they do," added Arika.

"Why are you teaching us things the way you teach them?" asked Ari.

Teaser laughed, a long, belly- shaking laugh. "Oh, Jonesy. Were we ever as young as they?"

Jonesy's shoulders tightened as his lips pressed tight into a solid line. He put his fists onto his hips and opened his mouth, but stopped and stared at the twins. Ari and Arika stood next to each other. Ari, with his head hanging down and Arika with her arms folded across her chest pouting.

Suddenly, Jonesy laughed. He laughed so hard, tears ran down his cheeks. "I do not believe," he said between gasps of breath to Teaser, "that you nor I were ever as young as these two appear to me now."

Teaser put his hand on Jonesy's shoulder. "And yet, at one time, we did walk under the stars of the Seven Worlds with the blissful wiles of youthful indulgence."

"They're at it, again," whispered Ari to his twin.

Arika nodded. "There's no getting through to them now."

"We should clean up for dinner."

"Try again tomorrow?"

“Agreed.”

As Arika opened the door and Ari stepped through it, Jonesy’s voice followed them. “Control, my young friends. Control your bodies, control your minds. That is your lesson for today.”

Arika twisted around to look at Jonesy. “You say that every day.”

Ari turned as Arika walked under his arm and out the door. “But which comes first?”

“Our bodies or our minds?”

“Both,” replied Jonesy.

He and Teaser lingered in the gym talking of people and places they once knew as the twins shook their heads and walked away.

Eugene

Eugene held her breath. Fresh air and sunshine beckoned, but it all depended on CC, who nearly always got her way with Cesar.

CC pulled a baseball cap out of her backpack, then looked into Cesar’s eyes. “I. Don’t. Care.”

Cesar shook his head. “But—”

“No,” she interrupted. “I’m tired of sitting in these rooms—nice as they are. I mean, I’ve never had an entire floor all to myself. Regardless, I don’t believe Mrs. Smith is going to meet with either of us; I don’t care if she did invite us. You can sit here and wait for the call if you want, but I’m going out, and you’re not going to say another word about it. You’ve been going in and out at your leisure, so now I will, too. I’ve only been to Vegas once, and that was for work. This time, I intend to have fun.” She put on her black and green Austin FC cap and turned to Eugene already at the door. “You ready? Isabella, you coming?”

Eugene looked at Isabella as she walked out of her bedroom. They both starred at CC, then at Cesar, and then back to CC. Eugene wanted to go outside so much, she itched. Isabella’s eyes dancing from CC to Cesar and suddenly to Eugene.

“Um…Well…”

“Ha!” CC headed for the door. “You two might work for Cesar, but I don’t. Come or stay: your choice.” She stopped and put her hands on her hips. “Come to think of it, Eugene, you work for me. Get your ass in gear.”

Eugene threw her shoulders back and smiled. “I like my boss.”

Isabella donned a bright pink baseball cap. “Anybody seen my pink shades?”

“Side pocket of your backpack,” Eugene yelled from the hallway.

Isabella grabbed her backpack from the sofa and winked at Cesar as she headed out. “You did hire me to keep an eye on her.”

“Be careful,” Cesar mumbled as he tapped his phone. He barely lifted the phone to his mouth, saying, “Ramon, go with them.”

He didn’t wait for an answer, but tossed the phone to a side table and stretched out on the couch to resume his nap.

Before the elevator doors closed, Ramon slid inside.

“What took you so long?” Isabella asked.

“Sleeping,” muttered Ramon.

His silky, platinum hair frizzed out around his face and neck. He combed it with his fingers, trying to gather it into a braid. Eugene slapped his hand away and did it for him. Isabella snickered, but she looked half asleep herself. It was the middle of the afternoon, so she and Ramon should have been napping.

“You two sure you want to go outside?” CC asked.

“I’m peachy,” Isabella said, smiling so wide that her white teeth gleamed in the overhead light.

Ramon pulled his fedora low over his eyes and adjusted his tie. “Whatever.”

Eugene rolled her eyes. “You two are going to be so much fun.”

CC burst out laughing, and Eugene couldn’t help but join in. Isabella giggled and snorted. Only Ramon remained glum.

“You’re right, CC,” Eugene said. “We need to get out for a while.”

“Agreed,” Isabella said with a nod.

They walked through the casino to the main entrance without talking. Isabella caught sight of the glimmer of sunlight through the wall of dark glass and put her sunglasses on while quickening her pace to match Eugene's.

"Chill, girl. We're heading outside."

"I'm about to burst from all this hotel air," muttered Eugene.

"Don't forget we're here on business," said Isabella, although she immediately regretted her words.

Eugene stopped, glaring down at her. "I know," she gritted out through clenched teeth. "I promised not to Wolf out. I just wish everyone would stop reminding me."

"Sorry," Isabella said. "I know what it's like to not be allowed to forget a mistake."

Eugene sighed and shrugged. "Me, too, and I hate being inside all the time. With Cesar all bitchy and floating in and out of the casino while we sit inside and wait, there was just too much tension."

Isabella laughed. "Tell me about it. I'm sleeping with my hands around my neck in case he gets bitey."

Eugene turned and picked up her pace to catch up with CC and Ramon. "You're not so bad— for a Vamp."

"Stupid Wolf," Isabella said with a laugh, nudging Eugene with her elbow.

That's when she noticed Ramon and CC talking with Wayne.

Wayne's clear gray-blue eyes sparkled at her, and he smiled that sunny smile no Vamp should ever display.

"I've got a car coming round for you," he told CC. "If I'd known you wanted to take a tour, I would've arranged something."

"I got this," Isabella said, moving to stand on his other side.

Ramon remained behind CC.

Wayne shrugged. "Just trying to be friendly. Vegas isn't Austin."

"What does that mean?" CC asked.

Eugene and Isabella both spun around. CC had moved away from them and stood outside the sliding doors. Behind her, Ramon

shook his head as the others rushed outside to join them.

Wayne lowered his face and looked around as if to see if any passersby were listening in. “The rules are different here. Everybody stays away from everybody else. No mingling except in certain places and at certain times.”

CC pursed her lips, but nodded. “Then it’s a good thing I’m human. Your rules don’t apply to me. "

Ramon opened the door to a waiting town car.

“Ms. Carson,” called Wayne but he couldn’t reach the door. Isabella blocked his way. “Just be careful. I mean that more for them than for you,” he added, nodding toward Isabella and Ramon. “I didn’t make the rules.”

Isabella nodded. “Gotcha.”

Eugene climbed into the back seat. “Where does that leave me?”

Before Wayne could answer, Isabella closed the door. “You’re specially invited to Vegas. Where do we want to go first?”

SHADOWS LENGTHENED in the alley between the old glassworks studio she used to work at and the other warehouses. Eugene wiped the sweat off her forehead and sniffed the Nevada desert’s evening breeze. Ramon leaned against a nearby wall, saying nothing, not moving.

“Almost sunset,” Eugene said.

“Yup,” he replied.

CC stepped out from the glassworks, grabbed Eugene’s water bottle, and drank most of it in one gulp. “Thanks.”

Eugene harrumphed. “There’s a whole fridge of water bottles in there.”

CC shrugged. "Yeah, but yours was right there. How did you handle working in there all day?" Without looking at Ramon, she asked, “You okay?”

“Yup,” he replied, without moving anything other than his lips.

Eugene stretched and turned her head, listening to the sounds of the city. Inside the glassworks studio, Isabella continued to talk to all the artists about their pieces. Outside, car engines rumbled, people walked, talked, won, ran, laughed, lost, cried; all the familiar sounds she'd grown accustomed to while living in Vegas, but even they weren't the same anymore. Many of the voices were muffled by masks, and the artists she'd worked with were gone, replaced by new ones working on new projects.

Eugene sighed and opened her eyes as she mentally sorted through the smells of the ally until she found one, two, and finally the third unwelcome scent. She leaned against the wall near Ramon, but before she could say anything, she saw the twitch of his ear that her friend back in Austin, Luna, thought was so cute, and his shoulders tensed just enough for her to notice.

CC straightened her back. Almost whispering, she asked, "Same ones who followed us from the hotel?"

Still as a statue, Ramon answered, "Yup."

Eugene shook her head. "Vegas isn't like it used to be."

"Nope," replied Ramon.

CC twisted her neck and stared at nothing as her face went blank. "Nothing stays the same, Eugene. You're not who you were when you lived here, either."

Eugene recognized the look on CC's face as the one she got when she looked into people and through them at the same time. Ramon looked away, and. Eugene didn't tease him for it. She'd seen what happened when someone asked CC to look inside them and they didn't like what she saw. Once, Eugene and her twin, Phineas, even had to stop a Vamp from attacking her when she refused to tell him what she saw. Eugene still felt relief when she recalled CC telling her that her inner Wolf was beautiful and good.

A flutter at the dark end of the alley, and her muscles tensed. She didn't turn her head, but kept her voice low and leaned closer to Ramon "I count two at the end of the alley, plus three on the roof across from the studio. Any more than that?"

“No. They’re waiting.”

“For what?”

Finally, Ramon moved; he shrugged. “I put in a call for backup.”

“Good,” said CC. Eugene jumped, having assumed CC couldn’t hear them. “Do you know why the Wolves here look so—weird?”

Eugene asked, “How weird?”

“It’s kind of like– well, - they’re not really there.”

Ramon raised his eyebrows and tilted his head. “Maybe they’re just different from the Wolves you know.”

The hairs on the back of Eugene’s neck rose. “But, I’m whole, right?”

“Of course, I told you—”

Isabella appeared behind CC, startling her. “Wolves are tricky bastards.”

“Seriously?” CC snarked. “Do you always have to sneak up on people like that?”

“Sorry,” said Isabella. “These guys are up to something. How long before our back up, Ramon?”

“Five minutes,” he replied, still holding up the wall with his back.

The right side of Isabella’s mouth quirked up in a half smile. “No time. Get the car.”

Ramon stepped away from the wall but stopped when Isabella screeched and pushed CC to the ground just as a gunshot echoed through the alley. He dove for the car, but not before a second shot bounced off the concrete beside him. He rolled on the concrete opening the passenger’s side door and crawled in. Isabella pushed CC into the back seat.

“Ow!” Eugene shouted as a bullet ricocheted and sliced through her right arm.

The force of the bullet knocked her off balance, but she kept on her feet as a man, built like a linebacker plowed into Isabella. His scent told her he was Wolf, as did his ability to strike Isabella before she could strike him, but he didn’t follow through.

Eugene took one step toward Isabella just as two hands grabbed her shoulders. She rolled forward kicking behind her. The hands released her. Eugene shifted her feet and stood with her back to Isabella. Four Wolves surrounded them, and two more were running at them from the end of the alley.

Ramon revved the engine, and Isabella yelled for him to leave, but CC shouted, “Not without them!”

The car’s tires squealed as Ramon said, “No! I’m not letting you out. They’ll be fine.”

One Wolf swung a metal bar at Isabella. Another jumped on Eugene’s back as one more swung a fist at her face.

Eugene blocked the punch and threw the Wolf off her back just as something hard and wooden hit her on the back of her head. She fell to the ground, and a knee pushed into her spine, forcing the air from her lungs.

The thumping of tires and the sound of flesh squishing told Eugene that Ramon had run over someone. Eugene tried to fill her lungs as something thick, heavy, and stinky covered her head, and a great weight pushed her to the ground. Her lungs suddenly ached for air and an unnatural blackness filled her eyes and mind, but as quickly as it had come, it left and she could breathe again.

“Asshole!” Isabella slugged the Wolf who’d held Eugene down. “You okay?”

Eugene pulled the stinking, sticky bag off her head and pushed herself up. She tried to answer, but only managed a grunt as she gulped in air.

The car skidded to a halt and the back door swung open, hitting a Werewolf that had leaped at Eugene and sending him to the ground. Isabella kicked him in the head and grabbed Eugene’s hurt arm, lifting her to her feet.

Eugene moved to get in the car, but stopped when she saw CC laying on her stomach across the back seat, a gun pointed at her.

“Down!” CC yelled before taking the shot.

Eugene obeyed so quickly that her forehead struck the car’s door

frame. Stars flickered in front of her eyes as the satisfying sound of a bullet piercing flesh and a Wolf's pained grunt met her ears.

She shook her head as Isabella pushed her into the back seat.

"Let me go!" CC shouted.

Eugene looked up to see Ramon holding her by the shoulder even as his other hand steered the car backwards out of the alley.

"No," he said, his voice as calm as if they were on a Sunday stroll. "Cesar will kill me if you get hurt."

CC grunted, but since both Eugene and Isabella were in the car, she stopped resisting.

Ramon slammed on the brakes as a black van screeched to a halt just in front of their car. Five Vamps led by Wayne jumped out. The remaining Wolves ran, dragging their wounded with them. The Vamps followed, except Wayne. He hung back and opened the car's back door.

"Everybody good?" he asked, nodding to Ramon. "Back to the hotel. We've got this."

Before the door was even closed, Ramon was racing out of the alley, and back toward Fremont Street.

TEASER

Some of the security officers slept curled in the comfort of their Wolf form. Some stood on two legs, slumped against walls as they contemplated their humiliating defeat, and some licked wounds and nursed broken bones. All of them stiffened at the sound of approaching steps.

Teaser leaned against the door frame, watching Jonesy apply ointments and potions to heal the Wolves. Neither had a cure for the fear that filled the room with its too sweet, rotten stench. Teaser's long, green nose quivered as if that could rid his nostrils of it.

Jonesy stood after rubbing a healing balm on a Wolf's back leg and glanced at Teaser. "You are certain?"

“An acquaintance domiciled within the airport's domain noted Midnight Air’s scheduled arrival in the pre-dawn hours with immediate departure to the city of Austin. It can be none but our distinguished guests who have requested their service.”

Teaser and Jonesy scanned the darkened basement. Red eyes peered at them from the shadows. Teaser scratched his chin. “There is a distinct absence of trust within these walls.”

He opened the door, bowing his head and motioning to Jonesy follow.

Jonesy obliged, stepping out into a long service corridor. Teaser led them between carts of dirty laundry and stacks of crusty dishes. They moved without speaking, silently weaving between humans who were glum with fatigue before heading upstairs to smile and serve the guests as they gambled and danced, feeding the casino with their magic. They entered an elevator that opened to the casino lobby. Voices, laughter, bells, music, spinning wheels, and clinking glasses flooded their ears and thoughts.

As they glided unseen through the casino, Teaser connected his mind to his friend’s and showed him Mrs. Smith, her gray head bent over her desk as she wrote in her book, the glare of a green light swirling from her quill. Wolves on two and four legs lounged around the room watched in silence, ignorant of the eyes and ears of observers. Upton, however, glared at Teaser as hatred poured out of every pour.

Teaser waited with the smile he always wore, his voice drifting between them like a soft breeze. “You’ve kept them waiting for three days. And with the attack this afternoon…” He shrugged. “You cannot blame them for feeling unwelcome.”

“Pompous Vamp!” Mrs. Smith slammed her book shut. The green light flared, then faded, but continued burning in her eyes. “Cesar should be honored that I invited him to my city.”

Teaser tilted his head. “You invited them, but delay in meeting them. Why?”

Mrs. Smith bound the book with a dark green —almost black—

velvet ribbon, then leaned over her desk. “I do not have to explain myself to you, Goblin!”

Teaser bowed with a grace long unseen in this world. “No, my old friend. That is your prerogative. I shall aggravate you no more with my foolish presence.”

Mrs. Smith rubbed her hands together as she stood and walked around her desk. “Out! All of you!” To Upton, she added, “You have work to do.”

Upton pushed the staggering Werewolves out of the room, but turned back to bare his teeth and snarl at Teaser.

When the door closed, Teaser asked, “Why do you treat them with such contempt?”

Mrs. Smith took Teaser’s hand in hers, caressing it as if she were still the old friend she once was. “There are many things happening that I can’t tell you about right now. I ask you to trust me for just a little longer. Everything I do is to protect the children.”

The mental connection broke. Jonesy and Teaser stood on a balcony outside the casino that overlooked the entrance, still unnoticed by human eyes.

Teaser leaned over the railing. “From where does her fear spring, my dearest friend? I am perplexed beyond perplexing.”

Jonesy shrugged and leaned close until their shoulders touched.

Teaser’s brows furrowed as he studied Jonesy’s face. “You, too, have great fear. This, I did not know.”

“We must embrace the unknown without fear, or live in dread. And yet,” Jonesy looked over his shoulder and lowered his voice. “Our fears do not grow in the unknown. This, I believe, you comprehend, but do not accept. The children.”

Teasers' shoulders dropped. “She was always kind to me. I mistook this kindness for affection.” He straightened and nodded. “We must be ready. More than our friends from Austin are in danger this night. Our charges are not still children who obey blindly. They demand and deserve answers.”

Jonesy put a hand on Teaser’s shoulder. “Nor are they ready to

walk unguarded, unschooled, and unloved. The two of us have known betrayal. Let us rise and face the misfortunes to come even as our bonds are tested and prove ourselves true guardians."

"Peace, my fellow conspirator. We shall set right what is wrong. Tonight, our betrayal begins and soon we will live clear of stains on our souls. The twins are loved, but do they know by whom."

ISABELLA

"Ow!" shouted Eugene. "You did that on purpose."

Isabella rolled her eyes and continued rubbing ointment on Eugene's bruised side.

CC leaned back on the sofa. "Eugene, I've seen you take harder hits than that and not complain. You didn't scream once when Issy sewed up your bullet wound."

"That was different," whined Eugene. "I think I've cracked a rib or two."

Isabella pulled Eugene's shirt down for her. "Nothing's broken, and you knocked the son of a bitch unconscious. Think about how he feels right now."

Eugene stood, rounding one arm and then the other. "Probably changed and healed himself by now."

"Eugene," CC's stern voice echoed in the room. "No changing: you promised."

"I know," Eugene sighed, sinking into the armchair across from her. "It's not fair."

Isabella slammed the lid of the first aid kit closed. "What a whiner. Geez!"

"I don't see you limping or—"

"Enough!" CC picked up her phone and tapped. "Damn, the plane can't be here until three."

"We're leaving?" Isabella and Eugene asked at the same time.

"I'm not staying here any longer than I have to. This is ridiculous," she scoffed. "I came here as a favor, and I've been

sitting on my ass for three days only to be attacked the one time I venture out. I don't care who or what Mrs. Smith is, or what kind of deal this is for Cesar. I'm going home!"

Eugene turned to the front door as the faintest of footfalls approached, but it was Isabella who made it to the door first.

"Cesar's gonna be pissed when he finds out," Isabella said, opening the front door. Wayne stepped in, followed by Jonesy. Isabella put her hand on her hip. "What do you want?"

"Mrs. Smith sends her apologies and begs your forgiveness for the atrocity that befell you this afternoon, Ms. Carson," Jonesy said, removing his hat and bowing to her. "If there is anything she can do to—"

CC put her phone down. With the slightest of smiles, she said, "Nothing to be done: I'm going home. Sorry I inconvenienced Mrs. Smith so much that she couldn't even meet with me."

"No," said Jonesy before pressing his lips tightly together. He cleared his throat, which made a sound like rocks dropping on a roof. "I mean, please stay. I assure you, Mrs. Smith very much wants to meet with you."

Isabella, still standing at the door, said, "Seriously? Look Franc- I mean Jonesy, it was all well and good when this was just a quick meet and greet. Being attacked changes everything."

"Yeah," said Eugene, forgetting about the bruise on her side and the bandage on her arm. "What's the deal, Jonesy?"

"And you," Isabella said, pushing her finger into Wayne's shoulder. "What are you being quiet for? You catch those Wolves?"

Wayne, eyes fixed on Jonesy, shook his head. "They got away."

"Got away?" shouted Eugene and Isabella at the same time.

"My fault," Jonesy said. He sat on the coffee table in front of CC. "Please do not depart in such haste. This situation is most disquieting to more than ourselves. If you would remain, just one more night—"

CC put her hand on Jonesy's arm, and kept her voice low. "It's more than disquieting, Jonesy. There's more going on here than one

missed meeting. This isn't my home. This isn't my fight. I'm going home tonight."

Jonesy straightened and looked out the window. "My empathy favors your opinion, Ms. Carson; tonight is not like other nights. I apprehended the Wolves who attacked you and returned them to Mrs. Smith. If you will allow me, I shall escort you to her myself and explain your concerns. There is a familial obligation she must attend to at midnight, but then she will be free to meet with you. If I fail to make this happen, I will forever lose face with you, marring my honor and staining my soul, and I will not allow that to happen. Isabella will vouch for the value of my word. Will my humblest of pleas persuade you to agree to this?"

Eugene watched CC's face. Her own curiosity piqued as the tension in the room morphed into anticipation. CC's eyes narrowed as she stared out the windows. Eugene almost stopped breathing, and her heart thumped slower and slower. Wayne pretended to not pay attention to the conversation, even as his shoulders rolled back, his head leaned forward.

Finally, CC nodded. "If Cesar agrees, I will meet with Mrs. Smith tonight before my flight."

"Call Cesar," Isabella told Ramon.

Ramon, his phone already in hand, said, "He says he'll do whatever CC wants to do."

He melted back into the shadows of whatever corner he was hiding in.

Jonesy put his hat on and looked at Wayne.

"I thought he agreed to stay in the hotel?"

CC stood and raised her eyebrows. "Why? Is he going to be attacked, too?"

Jonesy's face flashed blue. "He can go anywhere he wishes, but his presence makes many in the city uncomfortable. I mean, there are his connections and—"

"They get it, Jonesy," mumbled Isabella.

"Yes, yes," Jonesy nodded. "I shall call on you at eleven o'clock,

Ms. Carson."

"Assuming that works for Cesar," CC replied, but Jonesy was already opening the door to leave.

Before exiting, he turned to Isabella, and his cheeks once again flushed blue. "I did not think you recognized me, Isabella. I am glad you did, but Mrs. Smith will not allow you in her presence. I hope we may reacquaint ourselves with old times and old friends soon."

Isabella nodded and closed the door behind him.

Eugene

CC relaxed in the overstuffed chair with her feet propped up on the coffee table and gazed out over the Vegas Strip from thirty-five stories up. "Nice view."

Eugene reached over the bar and lifted a pitcher of juice. "Best view of the Strip from the largest casino no one's ever heard of."

"That part blows my mind," said CC. She held up the glass of wine in her hand. "I thought we weren't supposed to take gifts from Witches, but here we are drinking her juice and wine."

Eugene downed her orange juice. "Not as good as the stuff Cesar gets, but it is organic. Besides, we're Mrs. Smith's guests, and hospitality isn't a gift."

"It's a duty," Cesar added, walking into the room and falling into the chair next to CC. "You know, it's hard to tell just from looking around that there was ever a pandemic in these parts."

"Tell me about it." CC nodded.

Cesar's usual olive skin glowed like that of a kid in perfect health.

Eugene said, "You're looking…healthy."

He smiled and nodded. "Whole city's a smorgasbord." Turning back to CC, he reached out and brushed the side of her face with his fingers. "You sure you weren't hurt this afternoon?"

Eugene answered,. "I got one hell of a bruise. Thanks for asking."

“I know,” Cesar answered. “You already told me.”

“And where were you while all of this was going on?” Eugene poured herself more juice.

“Told you,” Cesar said,. “business.”

Eugene downed the juice as she waved her hands in the air. “I know, and we don’t talk about your business.”

CC laughed with her as Cesar rolled his eyes. “All good?” she asked without looking at him.

“I’ve done what I can,” he answered. “Not used to waiting, and I don’t like it.”

“Me neither,” Eugene agreed as she joined them on the cushioned chairs in front of the windows.

Cesar’s voice, which was barely more than a whisper, broke the comfortable silence they’d been settling into. “I wish you hadn’t called for the plane.”

CC let out a long sigh. Eugene watched, looking for that hesitation Isabella pointed out to her, a hesitation CC only used when she spoke to Cesar, but before CC could answer a ding followed by the rush of air as the elevator doors to the private lounge, opened and two kids walked in arguing until the girl’s eyes fell on CC.

Eugene leaped up and darted behind the kids without them noticing her.

“Who are you?” demanded the girl. “This is a private residence.”

CC smiled back at her. “Who are you?”

“Arika!” the tall boy beside her snapped as he pushed her out of the way and offered CC his hand to shake. “Hello. I’m Ari Smith. It’s nice to meet you.”

CC stood and shook his hand. “I’m CC: Catherine Carson. Nice to meet you, Ari.”

“You’re CC?” Arika exclaimed. “Teaser’s told us all about you. He said you’re the nicest person he’s ever met.”

CC hummed skeptically under her breath, then grinned.“You know, that might just be the nicest thing anyone’s ever said about

me."

"Nice," spat the girl, "doesn't get you anywhere in this world."

Ari punched his sister in the arm. ""Arika!"

CC laughed out loud, and Cesar moved to the bar as he fought back a chuckle of his own.

CC almost spilled her wine laughing, so set it on the coffee table and sucked in a gulp of air. "Well, if being nice is so bad, I hope I'm terrible. I can think of worse things to be."

Arika bit her bottom lip as her eyes went as round as two giant ponds and she stomped her foot. "Oh, I'm doing it again, Ari! I'm such a stuck-up little worm."

"Yes, you are," said Eugene.

The kids jumped and turned, both immediately smiling and laughing as they greeted her. "Eugene!"

"Where've you been?" asked Arika.

"How long are you here for?" asked Ari.

"Are you still blowing glass?" asked Arika.

"Will you take us to the studio while you're here?" asked Ari.

"You already know each other?" CC asked.

Arika turned back to CC, dropping her face and peaking up at CC's face. She offered CC her hand. "I'm sorry. You wouldn't be up here if someone didn't invite you. I'm really stupid sometimes, just opening my mouth and saying whatever comes to mind. My aunt's always telling me how stupid I am." Not looking at anyone, she muttered, "I'm such a worm."

Another ding and whoosh of the elevator opening preceded Jonesy, who rushed in roaring, "What are you two doing in here? Inside—now!"

The twins shrugged."Whatever."

"It was nice meeting you, CC. I hope we get to see you again," said Arika.

"We won't be long," said Ari. "Maybe you can come up when you're done with Aunt Ricia. Eugene, you should come, too."

Jonesy placed a hand on a shoulder of each twin and pushed

them toward a wide door. Once they he closed the door behind them, he turned to Cesar, his shoulders drooping. “Familial obligation: you understand, but…” He looked back at the door an, shook his head. “You must go, now.”

Cesar didn’t hesitate. He motioned for CC and Eugene to head to the elevator. “We’re leaving.”

TEASER

Gold lights shimmered and danced through the dark, windowless room from the cloudy sphere of light in the center of the round table— the only furniture in the room. Teaser thought back to the first time he and Mrs. Smith stood in this room; she was holding tiny Arika while he held little Ari. When it was time for the connection he leaned close to the orb. Like children everywhere, they reached out to touch the pretty lights. Tonight, the twins would stand in their designated places and reach out on their own and touch the orb. They would do it of their own volition, not knowing why, but with trust.

“Tonight,” he whispered to himself, “everything changes.”

Teaser stopped pacing around the globe and stared into the light.

“We all seek answers.” He scratched his chin, his eyes never leaving the glittering lights. “My dear wards demonstrate their merits and their flaws every day. The evidence is before us. So why does my composure waver? What if I am wrong?” He shook his head. “What if *we* are wrong? Are they ready?”

“Inside!” Jonesy roared from the reception room where Cesar, CC, and Eugene waited.

“Is it righteousness we seek or bedlam?” muttered Teaser. “Is it fair to them who are still yet children? Is it fair to any who walk within the hope of tranquility? They did not seek involvement, only answers.” Teaser tugged the hem of his vest, resisting the smile he always wore when he polished its buttons of gold as he backed into

a dark corner and let the shadows surround him. “The rectitude of our actions will prevail, but a sign from you, my dear orphans whose trust in me is absolute, would rest the quibbles in my soul. That is all I ask: one small sign.”

Arika and Ari stumbled into the room. Arika straightened the collar of her new green dress and stared at the globe before putting her hands in her pockets. “Oh! We rush to get in here and Aunt Ricia’s not even here to do her silly ceremony.”

Ari adjusted his new tie. “It’s not silly to Aunt Ricia or Teaser or Jonesy.”

“I like this tie,” Arika said, reaching up and tucking it under Ari’s jacket. “But it’s not green, which means she won’t like it.”

“But I do,” Ari whispered. “Besides, it goes with my new jacket.”

Arika winked, then leaned over the globe and peered at it intently. “Good. Now, what do you think all of this means?”

Ari shrugged. “We used to just do it on our birthday. Suddenly, we’re doing it every week.”

“Hypothesize,” directed Arika. “Me? I think it’s an excuse to make us dress up and behave in a way not natural to teenagers, just so Aunt Ricia has yet another excuse to be disappointed in us.”

“Disappointed in me, you mean,” said Ari. “Teaser and Jonesy both say it’s important.”

Arika pushed her finger into Ari’s chest. “But they won’t tell us why?”

Ari cocked his head to one side. “Hypothesis: they know why, but don’t believe we have the capacity to understand the reasons.”

Both squinted and stared into the orb. Each reached a hand out as if to touch, but each pulled their hands back before they did

Arika stroked her chin. “We’re missing something obvious.”

“Teaser and Jonesy aren’t happy we’ve been doing this so much,” Ari said, “so something has happened or will happen soon.”

“Aunt Ricia’s planning to do something,” said Arika.

“Or she’s already started something she's not supposed to,” said Ari. “Teaser and Jonesy are worried.”

“They’re nervous, talking to each other like we’re not here,” said Arika.

“And sneaking about, disappearing, and then acting like they’ve been with us the whole time,” said Ari.

“I’m thinking—”

Teaser stepped out of the corner and into the light of the orb. “I am thinking you are not where you ought to be standing.” He motioned for them to stand with the orb between them. “It is the designated time.”

“Yes, Teaser,” the twins said in unison as they took their places.

Teaser adjusted his bowler to tilt the way he liked best.

“You’re looking very smart, Teaser,” Arika said.

“In your best suit and hat,” added Ari.

Teaser smiled, once more polishing a gold button. “Your birthday fast approaches. Only one more rotation and you will be fifteen years of age.”

“Fifteen is very special?” asked Ari.

“Best suit special?” added Arika.

Teaser’s grin spread from ear to ear. “For Peoples in places far away, fifteen marks the beginnings of a new age of learning and understanding.”

“Which is why Aunt Ricia agreed to a party?” asked Ari.

“You both promised,” said Arika.

Teaser reached out but didn’t touch the sphere. As he waved his hand in front of it, his smile faded as wisps of green light floated around his hand.

“A party,” he said, his voice echoing as if it were coming from far away.

The twins looked at each other and then back at Teaser. “Teaser?”

The small door leading to their aunt’s office opened.

Breathless, as though she’d been running, Aunt Ricia’s voice rang out. “Ready at last.”

“All are correct and awaiting on you, my dearest of friends,”

Teaser said with a smile, but Ari shook his head at Arika, who nodded back.

“We’re in place, Aunt Ricia,” Arika said, now fully encased in the orb's light.

Ari opposite Arika and also fully covered in the orb’s light added, “And ready whenever you are.”

The sphere’s light pulsed, as it always did when they stood around the orb. The pulsing light mixed with the wisps of glowing, green smoke. Instead of filling the room with a blinding light, like it usually did, the clouds drifted out of the orb surrounding them.

The twins stood frozen with wide eyes and open mouths as the clouds danced around their heads and drifted all around their bodies.

Teaser held his breath. The earth shuddered before he was ready, and he stumbled to keep his feet under him.

“Ow!” Arika screamed, falling to her knees.

“Arika!” Ari shouted, as a great roar filled the shaking room.

“Now! Hurry! Touch the orb!” yelled Teaser. He leaned to his right and picked up Arika by her elbows and whispered, “Trust me.”

The floor continued to shake as the wind rushed into Teaser’s back, but he kept his hand on Arika’s elbow and helped her reach the sphere. The light burned green, then gold, then blue and pulsed with rays of red, purple, and white.

“Hurry!” Teaser shouted to Ari.

“It can’t—” Mrs. Smith’s voice was drowned out by the roaring wind. “What did you do, Teaser?”

Teaser imagined the rage marring Mrs. Smith’s face, but the only thing he saw was the light growing brighter and brighter.

“Arika!” Ari’s voice shouted but no longer close to Teaser.

Teaser watched Arika’s hand touch the sphere just as Ari’s did and he sang the song which began in his heart until it, too, danced around them. Finally, he touched the sphere.

“Teaser!” Mrs. Smith’s fury bit into his heart, tearing at him from the inside out. “Don’t! You can’t!”

Cold gripped Teaser's feet as the floor fell away, but he didn't fall; he floated on the wind. "Arika! Ari! Listen to the song!"

Faintly, as if she was drifting further away, Arika's voice called out, "Ari! Ari!"

Ari called out for her, too, but not in answer because he couldn't hear her. "Arika! Arika!"

And then, like the soft cue of an owl before she strikes, Mrs. Smith's voice floated into Teaser's ears. "Protect them, Teaser."

Eugene

Eugene didn't move even as Cesar pulled CC toward the elevator. Outside a ball of smoke and light rolled toward them.

"Problem!" Her heart raced. She bit her lip, and a shudder ran down her spine even as the heat of the beast she hid deep inside her burned. "What's happening, Jonesy?"

Jonesy stared out the window and shook his head before squeezing his eyes shut."Not now. Too soon."

"We gotta' go!" Eugene dashed across the room to CC and Cesar, but the smoky light hit the side of the building, making it rumble and shake. It crashed through the windows, shooting glass all around her.

Cesar pushed them to the floor and shielded their bodies as a hot, roaring wind rushed all around them.

Eugene shook her head as Cesar jumped off her back. She wiped her forehead, and her hand returned, covered with blood and sweat. "Cesar!" she shouted over the wind,as she helped CC to her feet.

Cesar stood in front of Jonesy, his hands fisting Jonesy's lapels as he shook the large man but Jonesy's eyes remained closed as his mouth formed words they couldn't hear. "Jonesy, I've got to get them out of here!"

CC grabbed her arm and pulled. Eugene turned, catching CC as she stumbled and fell.

"Cesar!"

In a breath, Cesar was at Eugene's side, lifting CC into his arms.

"Damn it, CC," Eugene muttered, pulling a fur throw off the couch and wrapping it around CC's leg. A long splinter of glass thrust out of her thigh. "Stairs - near the elevator. It's a code thing, right?"

Cesar looked toward the elevator, then back at CC and shook his head.

"Give her to me," Eugene yelled as she kneeled to take CC's weight. "Hurry!" She glanced at where the wall of windows once separated them from the desert winds. "There's another one coming."

Both watched another ball of smoky light soar over the city toward them. Again, the building shook, and a heavy darkness engulfed them despite the glistening flakes of gold and green light floating on the air and sliding down the walls, and gathering along the baseboards. Cesar moved with the speed of the undead from wall to wall, pounding each of them in an attempt to find them an escape route.

"No stairs!" he shouted.

Eugene and CC were almost to the elevator shaft when Cesar ran to them and picked up CC.

"Uh-oh," Eugene muttered, as she stood unmoving and staring at her hands. Green smoke floated up from her body, from her palms to her feet. "I really don't feel good."

"Hang on, Eugene!" yelled CC.

Green light, smokey and sparkling, drifted down from the ceiling and windows, coating everything with a glow that bent and fluttered as it grew brighter and brighter.

Cesar kneeled, setting CC on the floor. A growl filled Eugene's throat, and the harder she tried to suppress it, the louder it grew. Her body shifted between human and Wolf and Werewolf.

"Eugene, take control!" Cesar shouted, but his voice drifted to her as though he were far away from her.

The roaring wind, the shattering glass, and the breaking of

furniture made it hard to hear any one voice, but as she focused on his face, she suddenly recognized a great sorrow mixed with anger in his voice. Her heart broke to hear it; Cesar was the strongest man she'd ever known.

"I can't go. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought you here," he said to CC before turning to Eugene. "I shouldn't have brought either of you. I'm sorry."

Shadow drifted over him, and then more shadows shot out from under furniture and from hidden corners of the room to wrap him like a ghost made of darkness. Eugene put her hands on CC's shoulders; her pale, freckled face glowed green and yellow, red and blue, until she saw less of CC and more white, bright, blinding light.

Jonesy stood next to Cesar now, saying something, but she couldn't hear him.

Eugene reached for him, but his form swayed in and out of light and shadow before drifting away like a shadow in a room filled with light.

Eugene growled as CC shifted in her arms. She looked down and saw CC staring in Cesar's direction, her eyes glowing bright green and gold.

"Cesar!" Turning back to Eugene, she yelled, "What's happening?"

Reality slipped away from her, and Jonesy's voice whispered in her ears like a lullaby. "Let go. You'll be safe."

Eugene released a desperate growl. Her inner Werewolf erupted through her skin even as CC pressed herself against her warm, furry chest.

"I trust you, Eugene," was the last thing she heard before a long, lonely howl answered her own, and everything went dark.

ISABELLA

Isabella danced with a beautiful young man with the bluest of eyes.

He leaned his face close to her ear. "Vegas is great!"

She laughed at humans for yelling on crowded dance floors, but he smelled so sweet, and his heart beat so strong, and his blood pulsed under his skin with the vibrancy of life.

She leaned close to him, took in his scent, and then a hand grabbed her arm and spun her around.

Wayne's grip shook her. She stared, unable to say anything.

"Issy!" he'd shouted, and slid her off the dance floor.

No vampire risked moving so fast in public unless something was very, very wrong. She'd followed him, running up the stairs to the roof of the casino. Three of his team, all vamps, stood just inside the stairwell, pointing at the High Meadow Casino, its top floor bathed in lights of green, gold, blue, and white.

"What the hell? You brought me up here for a light show?"

She'd pushed the others away from the door, to step out on the roof but Wayne pulled her back inside.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you. Whenever any of us disappear, someone sees lights just like that."

Isabella pushed Wayne away and moved to the railing. Pointing at the lights, she'd asked, "Just like that? Someone survived long enough to describe those lights to you?"

Wayne moved to stand next to her, but kept twisting to look at the door. "Not exactly. What difference does it make? That's magic, Issy. We should get inside where it's safe."

Isabella pulled out her phone, dialing Cesar. "He's not answering."

"He's probably dead," said Wayne.

Isabella grabbed the front of Wayne's shirt, fisting it in her hand and pushed him against the closest wall. His people stared but didn't move to intervene.

Wayne clenched his jaw and put his hands over the hand she held him up with. "I'm telling you like it is, Issy. I'm sorry." He shook his head. "We've never seen lights like what's around the High Meadow Casino tower now, but someone always reports bright lights in the area whenever one of us disappears."

Isabella loosened her grip, and Wayne's feet touched the ground. She'd stared at the High Meadow Casino; the lights were fading. "Humans don't know the High Meadow's such a big tower, do they?" she asked. "Do they even know it's there? They never even remember its name, do they?"

"They will now," said Wayne.

Isabella's phone rang. She answered it without looking at the screen. "Cesar?"

"It's me," Ramon said. "You saw the lights? I can't reach Eugene or CC."

"Damn it. I didn't even think…" Isabella glared at Wayne. "Start a search."

Wayne stuttered, "Issy—"

"Start a search!" she snapped. "You, too, Ramon. I'll start beneath the High Meadow and move south along the Strip. You head north."

Ramon disconnected.

"Issy," began Wayne. "Everybody's scared. No vamp's going out on the street after that."

Isabella pushed her way through the growing number of vamps and humans standing on the other side of the door. "Use your heads. Whoever made that light show used up a lot of magic, a lot of magic that a lot of humans just saw. It's safer to be out in the open now than it was an hour ago. It's not just Cesar; it's CC and Eugene, too. And if you don't get your asses moving, I'll kill you myself. And someone find me a Goblin!"

She was halfway down the stairs when she heard the others following her.

With a sigh, she mumbled, "They've got to know what's going on."

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CHAPTER 2
COUNTDOWN BEGINS: LAS VEGAS

ISABELLA

Isabella paced back and forth in front of the fountains, staring at her phone while bumping into people and tripping on every crack in the sidewalk.

"'Scuse me," she muttered for the umpteenth time. "Arghh! Where is he?"

She tapped another text to Wayne.

Anything yet?

No.

"Little shit's not even looking," she spat.

"Hey!" said a man blowing smoke into her face. "Want to party?"

She scoffed and pushed herself between a group of tourists leaning over the railing waiting for the fountain show to start. She pressed the button to call Cesar again. Again, the call went to voice mail without ringing. "I should have gone with you." She bit her fingernails and jumped when the woman next to her yelled, "It's starting!"

"Will there be another light show at that casino - what's it's

name?" someone in the crowd asked.

"Don't know," replied another voice. "Didn't even know they had a light show. Hon, what was the name of the casino that… look! It's Elvis! Let's get a picture with him."

Isabella closed her eyes. The bright lights changing colors in the water reminded her of the ones that surrounded the High Meadow Casino. "No," she whispered. "They're not going to scare me away."

ISABELLA'S SHOULDERS drooped as she stared into the water, bubbling and dancing in time with the newest Vegas crooner. She hadn't cried in ages, but tonight, a stream of tears trickled down her face and into the water below. She rubbed the back of her neck.

"I didn't protect anyone," she whispered as the music reminded listeners that they had no cares in the world. "Mary Midnight will kill me. If she doesn't, somebody should. I'm useless." She squared her shoulders and turned toward the street. "Keep it together, Isabella."

Across the street, the shadows between two casinos faded to absolute darkness. It lasted less time than it took for a human to breathe in. She closed her eyes, listening. She heard a grunt barely perceptible over the music, the fountains, the cars, the busses, the limos, the nightclubs, and the tourists. It was a grunt she knew.

SQUINTING, she fixed her gaze on the space and dashed across the street, knocking into a few cars. Drivers stuck their heads out of their windows to see what they'd hit. Seeing nothing, they honked their horns and swore at other drivers before inching forward.

Stepping into the alley, the stench of burning flesh hit Isabella's nostrils, along with garbage, sand, exhaust, sweat, fresh urine, and chlorinated water from across the street. The sound of urine hitting

concrete and metal met her ears as a young man filled with young blood swayed as if the night's breeze would push him down.

"Whoa," the young man slurred. "Steady there, old man. Need some help?"

Isabella smiled. "Just drunk enough."

She rushed forward, grabbed the man by the back of the neck, and pushed him down to the form leaning against the wall at his feet.

Cesar's hand, covered with only patches of skin revealing bones and barely throbbing veins, wrapped around the young man's head. Isabella couldn't see his face, but didn't want to if it looked anything like his hand.

The young man's heart slowed, but didn't stop beating as Cesar pushed him away.

"More," he croaked.

Isabella propped the young man to his feet and guided him to the sidewalk.

"You should go back to your hotel," she whispered in his ear. "You're lucky that I found you. You had way too much to drink tonight. All you want to do now is sleep it off."

He laughed at the tale she spun for him of the wonderful night he'd had in Vegas—a night so good he wouldn't remember any of it. They staggered out of the alley, and Isabella hailed a cab while another man, this one with gray hair at his temples, waited for the woman he was with to pull her phone out of her purse.

"Oh, look!" she said. "Let me get a selfie with the fountains."

The man sighed as Isabella whispered his desire to step into the alley. She led him to Cesar, now standing, but leaning heavily against the wall. This time, as his hand wrapped around the man's neck, she noticed fewer open wounds.He was missing some of his lovely, thick hair, but already pale pink patches of skin fill the bare patches. Cesar pushed the man away as his heart slowed, but continued beating. Isabella guided him back to the woman, who was putting her phone away. The man dropped the bags he was

carrying, and the woman picked them up.

“Oh, sweetie, you look beat. Why didn’t you tell me you were so tired? Hotel’s only across the street. Let’s call it a night.”

They walked away, and the woman didn’t stop talking. The man would remember nothing of the night after stopping in front of the fountains.

Isabella went back to Cesar. He stood but with slumped shoulders. He reached out for her. As his body swayed, she reached her arm under his.

“Boss?”

“Ramon,” Cesar said. “Call. He knows what to do.”

“Sure thing. Just let me get you a little more blood. You still don’t look good.”

“Now,” he growled.

Isabella pulled her phone out of her pocket, and Ramon picked up before it rang. “Got him. Ping my location.” she said and disconnected.

She led Cesar to the sidewalk and sat him on a bench next to a woman waiting for the bus. “It’ll take a few for Ramon to get here,” she whispered in his ear before turning to the woman. “Kiss him.”

The woman smiled and leaned close to Cesar. Before biting into the offered neck, he said, “They’re gone. I couldn’t stop it.”

More tears trickled down Isabella’s cheeks as Ramon pulled the car to the curb in front of them and rushed out to help Cesar into the back seat. Isabella paid a cab driver to take the woman home, after telling her that she’d splurged on the ride home because she’d just come off such a hard shift; she’d earned it.

Cesar’s head fell back against the headrest. Isabella kept one arm wrapped around him while her other hand stroked his forehead.

“Downtown,” she said to Ramon as he slid behind the steering wheel.

“No,” Cesar whispered in a voice that sounded like sandpaper rubbing up and down a leather band.

Isabella stretched to look at his face. “What do you want us to

do?"

Cesar opened his clear, brown eyes. They held more white than brown, but the color was there. She forced a smile, but couldn't stop her forehead from wrinkling.

"Ramon knows," he said.

Isabella looked up at Ramon's reflection in the rearview mirror. His brow was crinkled, and his mouth was just as tense as hers. He nodded and turned onto the interstate.

Isabella squeezed Cesar's hand. "Where're we going? Ramon, he needs more blood—a lot more."

Cesar squeezed her hand back. "Call Max. He needs to know that CC and Eugene are gone."

"How did they—?"

Ramon shouted as he crossed multiple lanes of traffic, "Gone as in *dead*?"

Cesar shook his head.

"Jeez, Cesar!" Isabella said as relief washed over her. "If you weren't so messed up, I'd slap you. I thought you meant they were dead."

Cesar tried to smile, but the flesh on his cheeks had more healing to do; it was still flaked and peeling in large patches. "Talk to Cobalt. Don't let Phin come to Vegas. He'll want to. Mrs. Smith… wants…"

Cesar's eyes closed, and Isabella squeezed his hand so hard that his body jerked. "Cesar, please. Don't go to sleep yet. What do you want us to do?"

They turned onto the freeway, and Cesar slumped against Isabella's shoulder. Streetlights flew past the windows so fast that Isabella no longer knew which direction they were driving.

She placed her wrist next to Cesar's mouth. "Drink."

She shuddered as his teeth hit her vein, still plump and pink from her time nibbling on the dance floor. They drove down a side street, and she smelled peaches drifting from somewhere near along with apples, carrots, and sand. She recognized the roll of the wheels

on the concrete, and she knew they'd entered a parking lot; she looked up as Cesar pulled away from her.

"We don't own the Grand," she said

Cesar nodded to Ramon,"Good man."

Instead of following the parking signs, Ramon drove the car to the loading dock and pulled into a space covered with red lines before stopping the car.

"What the hell are we doing here?" Isabella snapped and poked Ramon in the shoulder. "He needs a safe room and—"

The lights disappeared as the ground beneath the car shook and lowered. Isabella blinked when light once again surrounded them. The car moved forward even though the motor was off.

"Jinkies," she muttered. "This is too cool."

Finally, the car stopped. Isabella reached over Cesar's body and did opened the door for him before he could reach the handle and climb out of the car. Almost as quickly, Ramon was at her side, and they lifted Cesar out.

"Hang on, boss," Ramon said as he held Cesar up. "Called ahead, and we've got a room and a meal ready for you."

Cesar twisted his neck, taking in everything around him. He opened his mouth but then closed it, nodding. Isabella followed Ramon's eyes to a side door made of steel, open. Inside, a bed surrounded by candles awaited them. On a table near the bed, a small pot warmed blood over a flame. Her mouth watered, but Cesar tugged her arm.

"Call Max," he said.

"I know, Cesar. I'll call," she said, nodding.

Cesar pulled his right arm away from Ramon and put his hand on her neck. "Now," his voice brimmed with more rage than she had ever heard from him before. "And somebody get Wayne and the others!" He sat on the edge of the bed. "No retaliation, no killing, and no searching. Shut down all collections."

Isabella and Ramon stood with their mouths open as Cesar lay down and closed his eyes.

“Move!”

They jumped, and the door closed with a swoosh and a song of tiny beeps as the locks sealed Cesar in and them out.

ISABELLA FOLLOWED Ramon through a small door she’d noticed earlier. It led into a cavernous room. Pale lights overhead revealed a vast, concrete room filled with piping and vents. Just ahead, LED lights illuminated desks supporting computers and monitors. Beds and tables lined the walls to her right and left, and giant steel pots with tubes stuck in the walls and ceiling hummed as their insides steamed and coughed. Five humans walked around the vats and up ladders, checking the contents and making notes on their tablets. Isabella took in the heady smell of yeast, alcohol, and fruit.

“What the hell?” she murmured.

Ramon walked around her to the nearest desk. “Stills,” he said without looking at her. “For the Speakeasy upstairs. Give me your phone.”

“Moonshine?” she asked as she handed Ramon her phone.

Ramon smiled. “The Mob Museum’s upstairs. They sell the moonshine and gin we make down here.”

Isabella put her hand on her hip and narrowed her eyes. “Seriously?”

“Yeah,” Ramon said with a nod as he handed her phone back to her. “You can use it now. It’s secure.”

“Jinkes!” she exclaimed with a wide smile. “How cool is this place! It beats our set-up from the old days.”

Ramon’s voice, obviously not to her, broke the nostalgia she felt.

He was talking on his phone. “No, I don’t have more details. Cesar said to keep Phin there and talk to Cobalt, that he would know what happened. Let me know if you get any info on CC and Eugene.”

Max’s voice said, “Got it.” and Ramon hung up.

“Hey!” Isabella grabbed the phone from Ramon. “What’s going on, Max? Where are CC—?”

Max ended the call before she could finish the question, so she handed the phone to Ramon.

“Cesar told me to call Max!”

Ramon tossed his phone on a desk before stretching out on a nearby cot. “You were busy. I texted Wayne, too, and told him to shut down all collections. Anyone ever tell you how bitchy you are when you’re hungry?”

Isabella threw her shoulders back, put her hands on her hips, and narrowed her eyes, but then she smelled the humans around her and realized she was very hungry.

“You gave Cesar more than you should have,” Ramon added as he put his hands behind his head.

A vamp she thought she should know, approached and put her arm around Isabella’s shoulders. “Come on, Issy; club’s open. Just remember this isn’t Austin. Don’t be seen.”

Isabella sniffed at a man leaning over the controls of a still. His heart beat smoothly, pumping healthy blood regularly.

“I’m okay,” she said.

The vamp guiding her laughed and pressed the button for the elevator. “Sure you are. Up we go. You’ll like the Speakeasy. I manage it.”

As the doors closed, Isabella narrowed her eyes and studied the vamp’s face. “Shirley?”

She smiled, showing off perfect, long, white teeth. “You remember. Most people don’t remember my face.”

Frank

Every time Frank came to Vegas, he shuddered at the dryness, the heat, and the masses of people from every corner of the world packing themselves into the desert until there was no room to stand. Austin had its share of international festivals, but people

arrived in waves, flushed the city with cash, and departed, leaving the city a little richer, a little wiser, and a whole lot quieter. Vegas crowds never stopped; they always roared.

Despite the early hour, the plane was full; the terminal was even fuller. If he wasn't so tired, he might have looked forward to a trip to Vegas, but he didn't sleep on the plane or the night before. When Marcus called and announced he was going to Vegas to help find CC and Eugene as well as stop Phineas from killing or being killed, he had to use all his powers of persuasion to accompany him. To his surprise, Marcus's sister, Luna, agreed that Frank should come with him.

Frank followed Marcus to stand in line for coffee as the latter lowered his backpack to the ground and poked his fingers into his ears.

"I know we're in a hurry, but I need coffee and for this ringing to stop."

Frank nodded. "I'd kill for a good cup of coffee, but I'll settle for what I can get here."

Marcus pulled his phone out of his pocket and shook his head. "Ride's already here."

"Let'em wait." Frank dropped his bag at his feet and folded his arms. "Coffee's important."

Marcus looked at his phone, at the long line of people in front of them, and then ahead as if he could see outside. Shrugging, he typed something into his phone with his left hand as his right cupped his ear. "Told'em we'd been delayed."

Frank looked around. The faces around them looked as tired as he felt, but Marcus's eyes continually darted around from one face to another even as he kept cringing, poking at his ears, and shaking his head.

"Relax," Frank muttered. "We're in public."

Marcus jerked his head to look at Frank. "Sorry, didn't realize I was so jumpy. And then there's all this ringing. It's driving me nuts!"

“I get it,” Frank said with a nod. “Well, sort of. We don’t really know what we’re up against here. Anyway, the ringing will die down soon.”

“Max said we’re not who they’re going to look for, but if that were true, why would they attack Luna?”

“I don’t think whoever or whatever they are did.” Frank held up his hand to stop Marcus from interrupting. “Something they wanted is in the house. I don’t think it was the same…” He hesitated and then lowered his voice so much that Marcus had to lean in close to hear him. “I don’t think it was the same people that took CC and Eugene.”

“How did you come to that?” asked Marcus.

Frank ordered their coffees. “For starters, the attack on CC’s house happened at the same time as the attack on CC and Eugene. Luna wasn’t supposed to be there nor her new friend. Danita? Isn’t that her name?” He tapped his phone to pay and moved them to the side. “Seems like the two attacks were coordinated, but whatever or whoever it was didn’t expect the house to be occupied. Think about it.” He stopped, looked around, and lowered his voice again. “Whoever it was saw Phin running out of the house with his friends hot on his tail…figuratively speaking, of course.”

Marcus choked on his coffee as he tried not to laugh, but kept his voice low. “Werewolf, Frank. Phin is a Werewolf. Cobalt is a Goblin.”

“Whatever,” Frank said with a nod. “He ran out of the house, and according to you, Cobalt’s not supposed to leave the house. The attacker knew he’d run after his friend as part of his protection or whatever it is he does at the house. Anyway, the fact that Luna and Danita were in the house was unexpected. The attacker improvised by banging on the door and pretending to be Cobalt. From what Luna said, Cobalt might not have made it back in time if Danita didn’t ‘have his button’. What does that even mean?”

Marcus finished his coffee and checked his phone. “No idea. I’m just glad it got Cobalt and Max back in time. Let’s get out of here;

our driver's getting anxious. You know, you might be on to something. Anyone who knows Phin would know he'd freak out if he heard his twin was attacked."

Frank started to toss his cup into the trash, but stopped as Marcus pulled the lid off his and put it in the recycling bin. "For some reason, CC and Eugene are important to more than the witch who runs Vegas."

Marcus said, "Cobalt said more or less the same thing. You know, I haven't seen him scared before. Luna and that Danita woman were lucky. Had you heard about Danita before last night?"

Frank shook his head. "No, but both Cobalt and Luna vouch for her. Good enough for me."

Marcus tapped his phone. "The driver says to move our asses. There's the escalator to our exit."

FRANK, squinting in the bright, early morning sun, caught sight of the old, black Lincoln sparkling in the sun and a slim woman with dark hair, darker Wayfarer shades, and a glittering La Vegas baseball cap leaning against it with her arms crossed.

"Jeez, it's about time!" she shouted.

Marcus nodded to Frank. "That'll be Isabella. Max says she only pretends to be a flake."

Before Frank could reply, Isabella was in the car and pushing the back door open from the inside. "Come on! A girl's gotta take care of her complexion, you know."

Frank scratched the back of his head. "Is she a…you know?"

"Vampire," Marcus said with a nod.

As Marcus and Frank settled in the back seat, Isabella turned and lowered her glasses so as to eye them up and down. "You were stupid to come out here." She pointed at Frank. "Who's the geezer? I thought you were coming alone, kid." The tires squealed as the car zoomed forward and around the car in front of them. "We gotta

hightail it before we're seen. I'm Isabella, but everybody calls me Issy."

Frank straightened his spine and pushed his suitcase out of his lap. "You old enough to drive?"

Marcus nodded to Frank. "This is my uncle, Frank Jarvis, Austin PD. We'll need him."

Isabella shrugged. "If you say so."

The car slowed at a traffic light. Isabella didn't move her head, but Frank caught her grin in the rearview mirror's reflection.

"Hang on back there. I'm going to make sure we're not being tailed."

Before she finished speaking, Issy pressed the accelerator and turned right.

Frank's body pressed into the door. The car turned again, and Frank pushed his hands into the seat to keep from flying into Marcus.

"You've done this before."

Isabella's fingers danced around the steering wheel as her calm voice replied, "Kind of my thing, you know: avoiding buttons and droppers." The car swerved between two trucks making their way onto the interstate. "The first time I was in Vegas, the city was no way as big as it is now. Those were some fun times. So, where we going? I hear you want to make a stop before we head to the hideout?"

Frank opened his mouth to respond, but Issy made a sharp right turn off the interstate. He cleared his throat before responding, "Command Center on Ninth."

Isabella's head didn't move as she wove in and out of traffic. "Yuck, more cops, but Cesar said to take the kid wherever he wants to go." She stretched her right arm across the seat in front of her and turned to face them. "Hey, did either of you know Cesar's been building a team out here?"

Frank laughed. "What do I know? I'm just an old geezer with a badge. I remember you now."

Isabella turned back to the road in front of her, but lowered her shades and studied his face in the rearview mirror. “Detective Frank Jarvis,” she said, enunciating every syllable as a grin spread across her face. “As I live and breathe…so to speak. How ya’ doing?”

“We’d both be better off if we could pull over and get something to eat,” said Marcus.

“Gotcha covered, kid,” Isabella said. “We got plenty of humans in the hideout, and I told them you’d want breakfast.”

“You’re platinum, pussycat,” Frank answered.

“Frank!” Marcus exclaimed, staring at Frank with wide eyes.

Color rushed to Isabella’s face. “You sure are sweet for an old geezer.”

Frank grinned as he nodded to Marcus. “I spent a little time in Vegas in my army days. Look,” he pointed to a sand-colored building on the corner of the street. “We’re here.”

Marcus stretched as he got out of the car.

“We won’t be long,” Frank said to Isabella. Before closing the door, he added, “Might want to make yourself scarce. Marcus will text you when we’re ready to go.”

Marcus moaned, “I’m starving.”

“This is important.”

Two detectives walked out of the police building as Isabella spun the tires. The tires screeched as she raced out of the parking lot. Walking past them, Frank nodded, certain he remembered one of their faces.

“I used to always remember names,” he muttered as the doors closed behind them.

“You’re old,” Marcus said.

“Smart-ass,” said Frank. He pointed to his ears as Marcus pushed his fingers into both of his. “Still ringing?”

Frank pulled out his credentials and nodded to the civilian at the window. “We’re looking for Happy. He around?”

“I don’t remember this happening the other times I’ve flown,” said Marcus, shaking his head. “Not that I’ve flown much. It’s so

annoying."

"Why don't you wait out here and try to rest a bit." Frank motioned to a line of chairs against the wall and a coffee machine steaming with a fresh pot.

"Thanks, I will," replied Marcus.

The door leading to the inner sanctum of the station opened, and a voice echoed through the room. "Frank Jarvis, what the hell are you doing here?"

Frank turned as a man who was wider than he was tall stepped out, grabbed his hand and shook it so hard that Frank felt it all the way up to his shoulder and down his spine.

"Happy!" replied Frank. "Good to see you. How are Marlina and the kids?"

Happy continued shaking Frank's arm. "Marlina's good, still running the restaurant. Two kids in college, one in culinary school, and one finishing high school next year. Kids are too expensive. Have you scared away Jasmine yet? Let's see, she's wife number what?"

Frank grimaced. "Five, and the last one." He nodded toward Marcus. "This is my nephew, Marcus LeBrere. He and I are in town for a little R and R, but I couldn't come and not say howdy."

Marcus stood and took Happy's offered hand. "Pleased to meet you, sir."

Happy ran his eyes over Marcus and sniffed. "Sorry—damn allergies. Anyway, family to Frank is family to me." Happy turned back to Frank. "Come on back. The Frank Jarvis I know doesn't take R and R without at least one side project going."

Frank turned to Marcus, but he leaned against the counter smiling at the attractive civilian working the front desk. Frank followed Happy down a long hall. They stopped twice when Frank recognized detectives he knew.

Entering Happy's office, Frank asked, "When the hell did Vegas PD start hiring kids?"

Happy laughed. "We're old, Frank. Now, sit down and tell me

what you're really doing here."

Frank sat in front of Happy's desk as Happy handed him a large mug of coffee, then held it up to his nose and sighed. "Thanks. We came in on the red-eye."

Happy closed the door. Sitting behind his desk, he turned off his computer screen. "So, what's up?"

Frank sipped the coffee, grimaced, and set it down. "Marcus makes killer coffee. He runs his family's coffee shop. Gotten spoiled with good stuff." He leaned back and stared at his old friend. "We got a couple of friends missing. A third might be in trouble, too."

Happy squinted. "And you don't think the Vegas PD is up to finding them?"

Frank picked up his mug, added more cream. "You know me, Happy."

"Ah," Happy said with a nod. "Friends of your nephew?"

Frank scratched his chin, considering his answer. "Marcus really is my nephew—in-law, that is. Jasmine's sister's kid. He had a rough start, but he's a hell of a good man. He needs my help."

Happy leaned forward, folding his hands in front of him. "What do you need?"

"Tell me about last night," said Frank. "Anything unusual for Vegas?"

Happy turned his monitor back on. "Aside from the usual hit-and-runs, DUIs, and a couple of raids on illegal cannabis shops—still can't get used to saying any of them are legal—nothing much. Unless you're talking about the light show?"

Frank sipped his coffee. "Tell me about it."

"No casino's claiming it, and it was cool. Funny, but I always forget how big the High Meadow Casino is." Happy shook his head, clicked to another screen, and stopped. "Oh, I almost forgot this bit: no complaints about vagrants."

Frank leaned over the desk to look at the monitor. "None?"

Happy ran his finger under his collar. "Nope, but I got a curious call this morning from Sister Blossom."

“What’s a Sister Blossom?” asked Frank.

Happy chuckled. “No one knows her real name. She takes care of whoever needs her, runs a shelter just off the Strip. Anyway, she called to say her folks are getting run out of the tunnels, but she doesn’t know where they’re going. She’s not one to hold back and make a fuss, but this…”

Frank leaned back in his chair as Happy shrugged. “You’re worried.”

“I just got approval to search the tunnels.” Happy took a sip of coffee. “Wanna tag along?”

Frank stood and nodded. “When do we go?”

Happy wrote down an address and handed it to Frank. “Four o’clock. Meet us here. It’s clear access into the tunnels. I’ll let my folks know to expect you. And your nephew?”

Frank laughed. “No, he's not ready for this.” He pointed at Happy’s neck. “What’s with the beaded collar?”

Happy tapped five strands of wooden beads sticking out from under his collar.

He pushed up on his tie and adjusted his collar. “They’re supposed to protect me from evil or something. I don’t know. Some superstition that keeps the wife happy.” He laughed.

Frank nodded but laughed with him. “Always keep the wife happy: I’m sticking with this one. She’s the best cook I ever married. Runs a huge catering and event outfit in Austin. Soon as I retire, I’ll help her with it.”

Happy led Frank back to the lobby. As he opened the door, tinkling laughter met their ears. They found Marcus standing with the clerk in front of the wanted posters.

“Being that ugly has got to be his crime,” Marcus said with a laugh. “And there are two of them? What’re the odds?”

Frank looked at the posters. Two men, almost identical, stared at him. One had long, scraggly, blond hair, a crooked nose, thin lips, and narrow eyes, each a different color. The other one, just as ugly, also had blond hair, but it was buzzed close to his scalp.

“If ugly’s a crime, those two are its poster boys,” said Frank.

“And they’re as mean as they look,” growled Happy. “You see either, go the other way.”

Frank turned to tell Marcus it was time to go, but he was already at the door and on his phone.

Marcus looked up. “Frank, Issy’s back. Come on. I’m starving.”

Happy followed them to the door and returned Frank’s wave, but Frank noticed Happy’s eyes were focused on Issy’s car and its license plate.

THEY PULLED into a parking lot of a casino Frank remembered from his first time in Vegas. He opened his mouth to ask if it was the one Cesar owned when Marcus said, “Hope this means we’re there. Why am I so hungry?”

“Me, too,” Isabella said, taking her cap off and running her fingers through her hair. She removed her shades and turned to smile at Frank. “How about you, Frankie? Wanna grab a bite?”

Frank couldn’t help but cringe. “Not with you.”

Isabella laughed as she turned off the engine. “Hold on to your hats, boys. Your minds are about to be blown.”

Frank rested his hand on the door handle, and Isabella winked as the lights around the car went out. “Whoa.”

Isabella laughed. “Isn’t it the bomb?”

Frank nodded as the floor lowered the car. “How far down are we going?”

“You know,” Isabella said, “I don’t know. We’re going below the casino, though, and get pushed across the street. Cesar's had this whole thing brewing, and none of us knew about it. Well, maybe Ramon did.” She gently slapped Marcus’s arm. “Did you know what a sneaky sharper Ramon was?”

“Makes sense,” Marcus said. “I mean, if Cesar suspected trouble, he wouldn’t use his usual resources, and Ramon told me once he’d

spent time in Vegas. Besides, Cesar's the type of guy who always knows what's going on."

"I knew I liked you, kid," Isabella said.

The floor beneath the car stopped moving and lights flashed, but they remained in the car as the floor beneath them turned the car ninety degrees. A long tunnel grew in front of them forming a runway. The floor pushed them forward, but as Frank's eyes adjusted to the dim light, he noticed the floor on either side of them wasn't moving.

"We could have walked in?"

"Sure," Isabella said. "But I figured you'd like to experience the whole thing. Plus, it gives them time to be sure they know us."

Marcus nodded at Frank. "Never try to sneak up on a bunch of vampires."

"Words to live by," said Isabella.

Frank's stomach rumbled and he rubbed his belly. "Can we please get moving?"

Isabella laughed so hard she had to bang her hand on the steering wheel. "I like you, Frankie." She cleared her throat as she sat up straight. "Cesar was hurt. As in, he should've died."

Marcus nodded. "So everyone's giving a little to help him along."

"Yup." Isabella shook her head and bit her thumbnail. "It was real bad."

Frank asked, "Was it the Witch?"

"I don't know," said Isabella. "I assume so, but this whole magic thing is freaking me out. I don't know how we made it here without leaving a trail of bodies behind him."

The floor stopped moving. Frank stood, and his stomach turned. He wasn't sure if he was from hunger or sick from the thought of how many bodies Cesar could have left in a quest to heal.

Marcus walked around the car to stand next to him. "Maybe you were right. I'm not sure what we can do here."

Frank watched as the young man who moved much too quickly

to be human approached Isabella. When she turned around, she smiled.

"He's doing good." She nodded to Frank. "They've got breakfast for you in Cesar's office. He's waiting for you."

Frank followed her through a small door. At first, he thought he'd entered a bakery as the aroma of yeast filled his nose, but the ting of alcohol followed. They stood in an enormous room with concrete walls and a concrete floor. Pin lights and computer screens illuminated three rows of desks that were seven or eight desks deep. Some were occupied, but most weren't. Overhead, low, pale yellow lights cast long shadows from the pipes crisscrossing the ceiling. Three shining stills stood behind the desks, and people walked around them, checking dials and tapping blue screens. Huge pots sat to the side with steam rising from them.

"We call it the Cave for obvious reasons," said Isabella. "It'll take a few minutes for your eyes to adjust, but don't worry. You're not the only humans down here."

Ramon walked to the nearest desk. "The stills are for the bar upstairs." He pulled his phone out and placed it his ear.

Frank cleared his throat. "Moonshine."

Isabella snaked an arm through one of Frank's. "How cool is that? Mob Museum's upstairs. We sell the stuff in the Speakeasy, and it's all legal."

"Must take you back, Isabella," Frank said, nodding. "Stuff any good?"

Isabella winked. "Like Cesar would make crap. Want some? It's a hell of a lot better than the stuff we used to sell."

For the first time, Frank heard Ramon speak rather than softly mumble. "Yes, I said I'd tell him." He handed Marcus his phone. "Talk to your sister. She's pissed you didn't call her when you landed." To Frank, Ramon added, "She's worried sick about you both."

Frank shrugged as Marcus calmed his sister, and Isabella patted him on the back.

“Family,” she said. “What’cha going to you do?”

Frank smiled at her. “Cell phones in a hideout?”

Isabella shook her head. “You really think we’re that lazy? There’s some sort of electronic science stuff around this whole thing. Every signal in or out is routed through the arctic or Mars or Jupiter. Don’t ask me about tech stuff. Ramon will fix your phones.”

Frank handed Ramon his phone and motioned for Marcus to do the same.

“He’s ready to see you.” Ramon tapped on Frank’s phone. Looking up, he narrowed his eyes and sniffed. “No cuts are scratches that might bleed?”

“Can’t tell?” Frank asked.

“Frankie,” scolded Isabella, “sniffing’s rude.”

“Bye, Luna. We love you, too.” Marcus handed Ramon his phone. “She says she won’t call again unless something happens, but I wouldn’t hold her to it.”

Isabella led them to the opposite side of the Cave to a closed steel door, where Ramon tapped a code on the doorframe. The door opened with only the slightest whoosh of air.

Isabella let go of Frank’s arm and rushed across a cozy room where Cesar sat behind a large desk, lit by a row of monitors. “You’re looking good, boss.”

Cesar’s usual olive oil complexion was a bit too pale, and his skin too firm and stretched in patches. Even his eyes, while still piercing, were a pale, golden brown instead of their usual clear but rich brown. Whatever the attack had done to him was worse than Frank had imagined.

He cleared his throat; the room was familiar despite being new. The faintest of clicks reached his ears as the steel door glided to a close and locked behind them. His breath caught, but he swallowed the sudden fear that gripped him.

“It’s not as big as your office at the old place,” he said.

Cesar closed his eyes for a moment, then pointed to two trays full of breakfast sandwiches and pastries on the coffee table in front

of a long sofa to his right. “There should be something there for you.” Pointing in the other direction, he added, “There’s coffee and juice at the bar.”

To the right was a bar stocked with sparkling crystal glasses, wine, and, Frank suspected, plenty of fruit juice in small refrigerators hidden behind the bar. To the left and in front of the comfortable-looking couch sitting beneath a large window covered by blackout blinds stretched an equally long coffee table laden with more than he and Marcus could eat in one sitting. Plush leather swivel chairs were in front of the coffee table and in front of Cesar’s desk. Frank sat as his stomach rumbled at the smell of hot bread, sausages, and eggs.

“You look like shit.”

Cesar smiled. “I’ve felt better.”

A touch of color returned to his cheeks as he motioned for Isabella to sit next to Marcus, who’d poured two cups of coffee and handed Frank one. He was already biting into a sandwich, so he nodded a smile and relaxed his shoulders. Frank brought the mug to his nose, breathing in the aroma of fresh coffee before sipping.

Marcus smiled. “Max said you’d survive, Cesar. Even Tommy said you would.”

Frank bit into a sandwich when the rumbling in his stomach overcame the fear of being in a room full of vampires. “I’m glad you survived.” He waved his free hand, adding, “Impressive setup. I should have known you’d have something in the works. I’m not sure how I can help you, but I’ll do what I can.”

Marcus swallowed the last bite of his sandwich and started on a pastry. “What do we know?”

“Maybe now you’ll give me some answers, too,” Isabella interjected. She’d been sitting next to Marcus, but moved so fast Frank wasn’t sure when she’d moved to sit next to him. “All this secrecy isn’t helping me help you, you know. What are these two doing here?”

“Mostly, we’re here to stop Phineas from doing anything stupid,”

said Marcus.

Isabella snorted. “Right, like you can stop a pissed Werewolf.”

“He’s got a good plan,” Frank said before nodding at Cesar. “Excellent coffee.”

“Only the best,” said Cesar. “Want to make sure you feel welcome and not trapped.”

Frank’s face burned until Isabella’s cool hand gripped his knee. “We know when you feel afraid. It’s a vamp thing.”

Frank cleared his throat. “No offense.”

Isabella winked. “None taken”

“Coffee is the cure for all things,” Marcus said with a smile. “Not that the sandwiches don’t help.” He looked between Frank and Cesar. “So, he’s always known you were a vamp?”

“Yes,” said Cesar.

“Really?” Isabella and Marcus said at the same time.

Frank brought his coffee mug to his face to hide the flush he felt returning to his cheeks. “Can we get back on topic?”

“Ramon,” said Cesar, “share what we know.”

Ramon left the doorframe to stand next to Cesar. “Mrs. Smith has been in charge of Vegas for the past ten years. Werewolves are flocking to her, but we don’t know why. The attack on the casino was clearly meant to kill Cesar and possibly CC. She probably wanted Eugene back in Vegas to work for her. We think she assumed with Cesar and CC dead, Eugene would work for her and persuade Phin to join her.”

Frank shook his head. “Eugene was here for a long time. She could have gotten to her anytime.” He poured himself another cup of coffee. “Something else happened. What are the facts?”

Ramon rolled his eyes. “Look, I’m not a witness to a mugging. This is—”

“It’s a good question, and Frank’s here because he solves puzzles.” Cesar looked at Frank. “There was a Goblin with me in the casino. We didn’t have much time but he confirmed Mrs. Smith wants Eugene and Phineas; he just didn’t know why. He also said he

and another Goblin were interfering with the spell meant to kill me and CC. Instead, it sent CC and Eugene someplace safe. I believe him."

Cesar closed his eyes and stretched his neck as he sat up a little straighter. Isabella moved to stand behind him, but Cesar waved her away and nodded to Ramon to continue.

Ramon returned his gaze to his notebook. "Once the Wolves got to town, Wayne—the vamp who runs our casinos—said he doesn't see much of them. I saw two arrive shortly after we did. I followed them to Mrs. Smith's casino, but I haven't seen them since."

"Oh," Frank muttered as he pulled a burrito away from his mouth. A long strand of cheese slipped down to his chin. "I may have a lead about where the Werewolves have gone. I'm going to check it out as soon as we finish here. Any chance you have a car I can borrow?"

Marcus leaned forward. "Why do you believe a Goblin? Cobalt says he's only trustworthy when it comes to the people in the house he lives in. And we still don't know why the Witch attacked the casino so publicly."

Cesar nodded. "The attack at the casino didn't go as planned. Mrs. Smith wanted me and CC dead, but she wanted Eugene alive. The attack was too complicated, and the Goblins I mentioned took advantage of it to save us. Wayne's been reporting for a while about the large number of Wolves coming into town and how they disappear only to show up later as employees at the High Meadow Casino. Well, not all, but they're the key to her plans. Having the Eugenes working for her would strengthen her position with the Wolves."

"The Eugenes?" asked Frank.

Isabella returned to sitting next to Frank. "You didn't know? Phin's first name is Eugene, too. It's a Wolf thing. It kind of makes sense when you think about it. Naming twins the same thing makes it easier for the parents when the kids get in trouble. And I can imagine those two being a handful." Isabella turned back to Cesar.

“Why CC?”

“The attack could have just been the wrong place and the wrong time,” Cesar said as one corner of his mouth twitched.

Frank lowered his voice and stared hard at Cesar. “But you don’t think so.”

Cesar shrugged.

Frank scratched his chin, then shook his head. “I trust you. You believe your source, so I’ll work under the assumption CC and Eugene are safe. But what I find odd about the attack is the location. Going after you in her own casino where everyone in the city could see it happen seems risky.”

“Exactly,” Cesar said, leaning forward. “That’s why I agreed to the meeting. It should have been the safest place in town.”

“Oh,” Marcus said as he refilled first his and then Frank’s mug. “I think I can help with that. CC called Luna late yesterday afternoon saying they were coming back last night.” Marcus nodded to Frank. “Forgot to tell you about that—sorry.”

“Ralph—the flight attendant and co-owner of Midnight Air—gave her his card,” said Cesar. “Mrs. Smith must have a contact within Midnight Air. She knew we were leaving Vegas.”

Ramon grunted. “I’ve known Simon and Ralph since they set up here in Vegas. No way either would’ve said anything to anyone about CC booking a flight out. They’ve been running Midnight Air for over fifty years. They build their business with discretion.”

Frank looked up from his own notebook. “Your friends may not even know they let Mrs. Smith know. Now, Ramon, you were talking about Werewolves. What’s so interesting about them coming here aside from them then disappearing?”

Ramon’s eyes widened. “CC got me thinking about that. She said the Werewolves here were different from those she knows in Austin. She asked me why, but at the time, I thought she was just being human.”

“Different in what way?” Cesar asked.

“She said their inner Wolves weren’t whole.” Ramon shrugged.

“About then, they attacked. My first impression of them was how uncoordinated they were. Been around Wolves when they’re pissed off. Even with no plan for a fight, they’re coordinated, sure of their movements. More than one of these guys held back as if he didn’t want to fight.”

“Who did they attack?” asked Marcus. “CC, Eugene, you, or Isabella?”

“Eugene took most of the hits,” said Isabella.

Ramon looked at Cesar and nodded. “Issy took her fair share after she sent me for the car, too, but only if she hit them first. They were so clumsy. They should have done more damage.”

Isabella stood and wiggled her fingers. “At one point, two of them tried to put a bag on Eugene’s head. I totally forgot about that.”

Cesar leaned back in his chair. He brought his hands together forming a steeple. His eyes scanned the room. “Theory?”

Ramon put his notebook in his pocket. “I didn’t put it together until now, but they were all wearing collars.”

“Yeah,” Isabella chimed in. “Wolves don’t wear collars, but these goofballs did, and they all had some sort of gem or stud on them.”

“Mrs. Smith’s controlling them,” said Ramon.

“Is that possible?” Frank asked Cesar.

Cesar shrugged. “Magic isn’t my thing. Sounds plausible.”

“How do we find out for certain?” asked Marcus.

“Ask someone who knows magic,” Isabella said.

“Of course! We can call Cobalt.” Marcus looked at Isabella. “The Goblin—well, Hobgoblin—living at CC’s place.”

Frank looked at his watch. “We better figure this out soon. If you’re right, we can help them. If not…” He shrugged before looking at Cesar. “You’re not forgetting to tell me about any old animosities between you guys and Werewolves, are you?”

“Jeez, Frank,” muttered Isabella. “That’s so Hollywood.”

“Hey,” Cesar scolded, “he’s no innocent, but he doesn’t know everything. No, Frank, no bad history between us and them.”

Turning to Marcus, he added, “You can try Cobalt, but he’s not likely to help. He’s under contract to protect the house.”

Frank said, “First, we need to stop Phineas. He’s on his way here, and Mrs. Smith wants him. We need to get to him before the Witch grabs him and puts one of those collars on his neck.”

“We have a plan,” said Marcus.

Ramon rolled his eyes. “As far as we know, Mrs. Smith knows who you are and that you’re in town. You can’t go walking around out there.”

“I’m not going to walk anywhere.” Marcus pointed at Isabella. “She’s going to drive me.”

“Peachy,” said Isabella. “I like a kid who knows where the goods are.”

Cesar lifted a hand and looked at Frank. “You sure about this?”

Frank nodded. “By now, Phineas has cooled off a bit. He’s also tired, so he won’t be thinking too clearly. He's not going to stop because a vampire wants him to.” Frank winked at Cesar. “No offense. But he’ll stop to help a friend. In the meantime, I’m headed to the tunnels.”

Cesar nodded and looked at Marcus. “And you’re comfortable with the plan?”

“I’m sure,” said Marcus. “Especially if Isabella drives me out there.”

Isabella leaned back in her chair. “You know, a friend who can’t use force to make him stop. It might work.”

“And for all Phin will know,” said Ramon, “Eugene sent Marcus to get him.”

“Phin’s our best hope of getting the Wolves away from Mrs. Smith.” Cesar relaxed in his chair. “I can’t help much right now. I don’t think Mrs. Smith is going to worry too much about Marcus or Frank—at least not for a while. She has no humans working at the hotel above the fifth floor.”

“She doesn’t think much of humans?” smirked Frank.

“That’ll be her downfall.” Cesar leaned forward. “What’s this

about the tunnels?"

"My friend with Vegas PD is leading a search of the tunnels," Frank said. "Homeless people have been pushed out and a lot of people are asking questions. If Mrs. Smith is as smart as you say she is, she's been keeping the Werewolves there."

Cesar nodded. "Sounds right, but she also has contacts with the police department. She'll move them before you find them." He stood. Frank didn't see Ramon move until he was behind Cesar, ready to offer aid. Cesar smiled. "I'm okay, but I need to sleep and heal. I want you with Frank. Don't forget about the Wolves working with the police. I'm trusting you all to not to get caught. Frank's in charge until I wake up."

ISABELLA

"It's a good plan," said Isabella, stretching her neck as she stood next to the car under a billboard on the highway outside the city limits. "Been doing snatch-and-runs since before I had fangs."

Marcus leaned back in the passenger seat and laughed. "Then why so nervous?"

"You got me, kid," Isabella said moved to stand next to the passenger door. "Ramon says this Phin's a real bruiser, but you tell me he's a friend. I've got to do this right."

Marcus shook his head. "Phin will stop when he sees me waving at him. I'll tell him what we know, and he'll come with us back to the Cave."

"Ha!" Isabella scoffed. "You don't know Wolves like I do. He's pissed, he's tired, and he's itching for a fight. One of us—"

"Relax," interrupted Marcus. "I've made him a coffee almost every day for over a year. We won't need to fight him, no matter how much you want to."

Isabella placed her hands on her hips. "Better to be prepared. Frank made me promise to take care of you."

"Frank worries about everything," said Marcus. "Ugh! When will

this ringing end? It's driving me nuts."

Isabella stared at Marcus and pursed her lips. "You like the old man, don't you? He's a good guy. You kind of can't help but like him."

Marcus turned his lovely green eyes to her. "I didn't want to like him for a long time, but then I realized he was alright, and he makes Aunt Jasmine happy."

Isabella tilled her head to the right and left. From the south, the roar of a motorcycle's engine drifted to her ears. "I think I hear him." Marcus opened the door, but before he stepped out, she put her hand on his shoulder. "Take it easy and call me if he doesn't come willingly."

Marcus patted her hand. "I want to save him, Issy. The plan will work."

Isabella brought her thumbnail to her lips, grunted, and pushed her fists into her pockets. Marcus reached the edge of the interstate and waved to her. She closed her eyes, smelling hints of diesel, gasoline, coyotes, and rabbits.

Shaking her head, she muttered, "This isn't Chicago, and it's not the old days. He'll be fine." She heard the motorcycle engine from about a mile away, approaching quickly. "That's got to be him."

Three large trucks shook the ground as they passed the car, driving out of Vegas. A car hummed past on its way into the city. Coyotes grumbled. A night bird took flight. The motorcycle drew closer.

Marcus turned and laughed. "It's him: belt's loose. I've been telling him to fix it for weeks."

"This is it, Marcus," whispered Isabella. She shifted her gaze to the south, and there, in the distance, was a single headlight of a motorcycle. She sat up straight and tapped the starter with her finger without pressing the car on. "Get a grip, woman. You can do this in your sleep."

She loosened her shoulders, focusing on the sounds around them. Marcus turned, and Isabella did the same as she heard other

motorcycles headed their way.

She leaned out the window. “Marcus, more bikes. It’s got to be the bad guys!”

Marcus slowed his breaths and inched closer to the highway. Isabella heard him whisper, “Easy, Marcus. You got this.”

“He’s good,” she said as she pressed the starter.

Marcus took the last step, standing on the highway and waving his arms, but the motorcycle didn’t slow. “Phineas!” he shouted with a jump.

The motorcycle rushed past him.

“Damn it!” Isabella muttered as Marcus shouted, “Dang it!”

The motorcycle slowed, turned around, and inched its way on the gravel toward Marcus, who walked over to meet him, but Phineas pulled his helmet off and threw it on the ground.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing out here?” he shouted.

Marcus lifted his hands in surrender. “Saving your ass. Eugene’s, too.”

“What? Where is she?” Phineas got off his bike and stalked toward the car.

“Get in!” shouted Isabella.

Phineas glared at her. “This has nothing to do with vamps.”

Marcus put his hand on Phineas’s shoulder. “This is bigger than you know, Phin.”

Phineas turned to stare down into Marcus’ face. A low, long growl grumbled from his throat.

Marcus squared his shoulders and returned his stare. “You can tear me apart if you want, but the fight you’re running into is bigger and scarier than you. We need your help, and so does Eugene.”

“He’s right.” Isabella said, inching the car closer to them. “They almost killed Cesar. And you can’t trust the Wolves here.”

Phineas sank to a squat and covered his head with his hands. Marcus kneeled next to him and opened his mouth, but said nothing. His eyes glazed over, but just as quickly as the strange

expression appeared, he shook his head and looked toward the lights heading toward them.

“They’re coming for you, Phin, and saving you is how we get Eugene back.”

“Let’s go—now!” Marcus pulled the back door open and leaped in, and Isabella kept the car moving forward even as she shouted, “Leave the bike!”

Phineas, gripped the handlebars of his bike, calling to Isabella. “Faster! Get out of here!.”

“No, you don’t,” grumbled Isabella, grabbing Marcus ’s arm as he pushed the door back open, but Isabella grabbed him before he could jump out.

“No you don’t. We stick to the plan.”

“How?” Marcus asked.

Ignoring Marcus she moved faster than human sight could follow, picked up Phineas’s motorcycle, and threw it into the brush behind the billboard before pushing Phineas toward the car. “Get in the car before you piss me off.”

Isabella was back in the car. It had never stopped rolling forward.

Phineas dove into the car as Isabella hit the accelerator, spun them around, and floored it.

“Bitch!” mumbled Phineas. “How the hell do you expect to outrun them with this old piece of shit?”

Isabella laughed as the engine roared. “You think I’d drive any old hag?”

Both men grabbed headrests and door handles as she accelerated, throwing them back into the backs of their seats. Two motorcycles jumped onto the interstate in front of them. Isabella grinned as she swerved the tiniest amount and hit them both from behind, sending them flying over the medium.

“Just like back in the day with Vinnie and the boys,” she said. “All I need is a peashooter and a typewriter.”

On the other side of the freeway, five motorcycles flashed by,

and a shotgun blast scattered over the top of the car.

Phineas shook his head. “Guns?”

Marcus turned to look out of the rear window. “I think they’re heading for the turn around about two miles back. Why are they shooting if they want him alive?”

Phineas stared straight ahead and squinted. “More ahead of us. Why do they want me alive if they tried to kill Eugene?”

“Idiot,” grumbled Isabella. “If you hadn’t run out of Austin like a mad Wolf, you’d know she’s not dead. She’s just not here anymore.”

Phineas reached forward, grabbing Isabella’s shoulder. “Where is she? What did you do with her?”

Marcus put his hand on Phineas’s shoulder and tried to pull him back, but Phineas pushed him away.

“Get your hands off me, you stupid Wolf!” shouted Isabella, and the two men tumbled into the back of the front seat as the car skidded to a halt.

Isabella yelled, “Knock it off or I’ll drive right up to Mrs. Smith and kiss both your asses goodby!”

Marcus looked behind them. “They’re getting closer.”

“Wolves!” Isabella accelerated so that once again, they flew back in their seats. Staring straight ahead, she said, “Listen, Phin. Eugene and CC are alive. Mrs. Smith tried to kill CC and Cesar. She wants you and Eugene alive. She’s spelled the Wolves here. Well, we’re pretty sure that’s what she’s doing.” She lifted one hand to ward off his questions. “Don’t ask. I don’t know magic. Goblins intervened and your sister and CC are safe — off world…for now. We’re trying to keep you from being taken and spelled into submission. Will that suffice for now?”

Phineas ran his hand through his hair. “You’re sure she’s alive in the Wildes?”

“She’s safe, and we’re going to get them back. I promise.” The desert gave way to the first signs of the city, and Marcus shifted in his seat. “Looks like they gave up. I don’t see them anymore. So, what are the Wildes?"

“They’re waiting for us,” Isabella said, ignoring his question. “Plan B.”

Phineas stared out the front window. “If Goblins are involved, they’ll be in the Wildes. Eugene can survive that. If CC’s with her, she’ll be okay, too, as long as they can hide her hair.”

Isabella slowed the car. “Listen, they’re setting us up. Once inside the city, we’re limited in operations. Marcus, when I stop the car, get out. There’s a casino up ahead. Get inside, call Frank, and stay there until he comes to get you.”

“I’m not leaving you guys. You need me,” Marcus said.

“It’s me they want,” Phineas said. “As soon as you’re away from me—"

Isabella ran a red light at an overpass. A pickup truck rammed into the car, spinning it around until it slammed into the nearest overpass column. Marcus sat up, shaking shattered glass off his back. Isabella pushed the roof off the car while grabbing a shotgun from under her seat.

“Run!” she shouted to Marcus as the blast from her gun tore through the quiet of the early morning.

Marcus pushed, but the door wouldn’t open. He looked to Phineas, who was shaking blood out of his eyes from a wound on his forehead. Shotgun blasts answered Isabella’s, along with the creak and moan of metal bending and breaking. Holding the car door with one hand, Isabella grabbed Marcus and threw him toward the far side of the column that the car was wrapped around.

She jumped back, landing next to him. “Stay down,” she said as she reached around the column and shot over her mangled car. “Look what they did my car.”

A great howl echoed under the overpass. Answering howls bounced around them as another shotgun blast made them both duck.

Phineas leaped out of the car headfirst. His eyes flashed like fire as he rolled to all fours and stretched his back, then howled. All but two of the Werewolves stopped and crouched.

“Wow,” Isabella muttered to herself as she dashed forward to grab Phineas.

A white van skidded to a halt in front of him. Isabella shot at it, but Phineas pushed her away from him as the door opened and one of the ugliest men Isabella had ever seen shot a dart at Phineas. He fell to the ground, and before Isabella could cover him, two men jumped out of the van, their own guns blazing. Each of them grabbed Phineas by an arm and dragged him into the van. The ugly man laughed as the van sped away, his long, greasy hair blowing across his face.

More gun shots erupted, and Isabella jumped back to Marcus, knocking him down. “I’m going after the van. Get to the casino.”

“No!” Marcus shouted, grabbing her arm. “Don’t!”

Isabella stared at him. His grip was stronger than it should have been, and there was a far away look in his eyes. She didn’t know if he saw her or through her. The hairs on his arms stood straight up, his back stiffened, and sweat poured off his face. Something wasn’t right.

Before she could ask if he was hurt, he shouted, “Can’t you hear that?” He blinked rapidly and pulled her to him. “Hide! The light! It’s coming!”

Isabella dove under what was left of her car, dragging Marcus with her, but he rolled on top of her.

“Close your eyes,” he shouted into her ear.

A pale, green light fell over both of them. As she closed her eyes, a white light, brighter than she’d ever imagined, flashed. A blue light followed, searing her eyes and skin, her brain. Engines roared to life and rushed away. Screams shattered her bones until she realized they were her screams, and then the sounds of feet and clawed paws running away, followed by the quiet of a city on the verge of a new day. It all called her to sleep.

“Issy!” Marcus’ voice drifted to her from far away. He was afraid.

Soon, metal creaked, twisted, and broke. Her senses heightened,

ready for the kill. A racing heart—a strong heart, pumping blood—so close—so familiar.

Marcus's voice returned, calmer this time as the heartbeats slowed. "Take it easy, Issy." His fear faded to calm, but his tone was urgent. He needed her for something. "Take your hands off my neck. I can get you what you need, but you need to let me go."

A long, guttural growl answered him. Isabella smelled blood flowing: fresh, young, powerful blood. The heartbeat was so strong, so steady with that one little flutter that meant he was excited. She knew that heartbeat.

Marcus continued. "I know I smell tempting, but you'll hate yourself if you kill me. Think of CC, Cesar. Remember the old days in Vegas? Trust me, Issy."

Isabella moaned. Pain flowed through her, over her, in her. She'd never hurt so much, but Marcus needed her.

"Ow. Ow. Ow." Her grip loosened on whatever she'd been holding. She slid to the ground, but the ground hurt.

"What the—?" She stopped, grappling with panic forming in her brain. "Marcus! No! Marcus, I'm so sorry. I hurt everywhere. I can't see. Please, tell me I didn't hurt you?"

Marcus let out a long sigh. "I'm good Isabella. You didn't hurt me, but you're hurt. I'm going to help you up. Is that okay?"

Isabella groaned as Marcus put an arm under her shoulders and helped her stand.

Frank

The soft leather seat molded itself around every contour of Frank's body, massaging the stiffness in his back and hips. Cool air brushed his cheeks. Sinatra cooed through multiple speakers as though he were front stage, center. Ramon said nothing, sitting like a statue with his eyes hidden behind dark glasses despite the car's tinted windows, his left hand on the top of the steering wheel, and his right hand on the bottom. Only his left thumb moved, tapping to

keep time with Ol' Blue Eyes.

Frank shook his head to chase away the desire to sleep. "Twenty-three?"

"Yup," replied Ramon.

Frank sighed, fighting the urge to close his eyes. "Real or vamp years?"

Ramon snorted but remained stiff and unmoving, as if he wasn't weaving the car through traffic and around tourists. "I'm twenty-three years old. I changed when I was sixteen."

"You look twenty-three. There's a guy in Austin, Tommy, looks about your age."

Ramon's face finally broke as the right corner of his mouth ticked up before settling back into a straight line. "He's one of the old guys. I've no idea how old he really is."

Frank rolled thoughts of age and perception through his mind. "Kind of gathered that, given the way he acts—"

Ramon nodded. "When I met him, I thought he was my age. It was his thing—being a kid. Me, I couldn't wait to get out of my teens." He brought the car to a stop at a bus stop behind a casino. "Hang right," he said, pointing to the sidewalk. "The tunnel entrance is between the two garages. Plenty of cops there already. You can't miss 'em."

Frank opened the door. "You coming?"

"Nope," Ramon said as he reached behind his seat. He pulled out a holstered handgun, offering it to Frank. "Cesar said you prefer a belt holster."

Frank raised his hands. "I don't have a license to—"

"On top." Ramon pushed the gun into Frank's hand. A card dropped out of a side pocket of the holster.

"How did he manage a license?" Frank examined the card. "Is this real?"

Ramon shrugged. "As real as it needs to be."

Frank pursed his lips, staring at the gun.

Ramon took off his shades. Sharp, almost black, but clear eyes

bore into Frank's. "I know you don't like it, but if there are Werewolves down there and they're controlled by Mrs. Smith, they're not going to let you just walk out, police escort or not. And don't forget, some of those cops are Wolves, too."

Frank put on the holster. "You're right. I just kind of hoped… well, you know."

"I know," said Ramon, putting his shades back on. "Be careful and don't go so deep I can't get you out."

"I'll be careful. You be ready to drive." Before Frank shut the door, he bent down to look at Ramon. "Still can't believe you like Sinatra. You're too young."

Ramon shrugged and almost smiled. "He's Vegas, baby."

Frank closed the door, listening for the almost silent click as it closed, then watched the car roll away, it only sound the wheels on the road.

FOUR LARGE TUNNEL entrances glowed white from all the lights inside, matching the whiteness of the concrete culverts in the glare of the afternoon sun. White shade tents dotted the entrance to the tunnels as uniformed men and women exited trucks, cars, and vans, ready to enter the tunnels. A few civilians—mostly waitstaff and cleaning crew from the surrounding casinos, judging by their uniforms—had gathered to see what the police were up to.

Frank spotted Happy standing in the shade of the command truck and waved. Happy motioned him toward the steps leading down to the walkway connecting two casino parking garages.

"Started without me," said Frank after Happy introduced him to the others who were in the shade.

"Just finished setting up. We're ready to go in now. You sure you want to do this?" Happy asked, handing Frank a safety vest.

Frank shrugged. "Not my first choice of tourist spots, but let's do it."

He squinted until his eyes adjusted from the darkness of the tunnels, lit only by the spotlights at the entrance and their flashlights. He forced himself to take a deep breath; like most of the sewers he'd been in, the place was filled with the stench of mold, rats, and shit. Unlike other city sewers, he smelled desert and canine.

"How many live down here on a regular basis?" he asked Happy, immediately in front of him.

"Too many," Happy mumbled, shaking his head. "No place for humans or—"

"Captain," the officer behind Frank interjected. "First split and nothing."

"Roger that," replied Happy. Turning to Frank, he said, "Expected to see people by now."

Frank nodded and was about to reply when an ugly, familiar odor crept into his nose.

"You smell that?" he asked and took two more steps to his right. Shining his flashlight on the ground. Rats scattered, revealing a hand reaching up from a pile of muck. He let his light follow stiff fingers down to an arm, attached to a shoulder, and then a head with one eye staring into his light. "You've got a crime scene."

Happy barked orders, and people hustled to secure the area. As Frank stepped aside, he peered further into the tunnel, beyond the edge of his flashlight's spread. Under the sounds of people calling to each other, radios, and rats, the faintest hint of claws scratching against concrete crept into his ears. They weren't running away, but moving closer. He held his breath as the claws slowed, and then a pair of red eyes blazed to life in the darkness. They blinked and disappeared. Frank turned his attention back to the surrounding officers to see if they'd seen the eyes. Satisfied they hadn't, he headed back to the entrance to call Ramon.

Frank passed a police photographer taking pictures of the graffiti on the tunnel's walls. Some asked for help. Some listed names with question marks or lines drawn through them. In places arrows

directed people toward help or to darker passages. The large letters spelling out, *Beware of Wolves* in red paint caught Frank's attention.

Frank kept his hands in his pockets, watching the crime scene team clear away the detritus surrounding the body.

Happy walked toward him as a man pointed his flashlight at another one of the warnings and said loudly enough for anyone around them to hear, "I'll clobber the next jackass who tries to tell me there are wolves in the tunnels."

Frank ducked his head to hide his smile.

"That goes for you, too, Frank," muttered Happy.

Frank shook his head. "Not saying a word."

"But you're doing it very loudly." Happy scrunched up his nose as a technician walked by with a bag of dead rats. "Damn, they stink. What do you think, Frank? Could this be one of the folks you're looking for?"

Frank shrugged. "Looks like this mess has been here too long, but I'll hold off until your people have more to say about it."

Happy's radio cracked. "We have another body."

"Damn," muttered Happy. "No way this is staying quiet. Wait here."

Frank recognized the anger in Happy's voice as he growled at the officers running past on the way to the new scene and understood the frustration in managing a crime scene containing multiple bodies.

He pulled out his phone and was about to text Ramon about the second body when an angry growl whispered through the air. If anyone else in the tunnel heard it, they didn't stop what they were doing. Frank pulled out his flashlight and pointed it down a small tunnel behind the body. He turned his head to listen and heard the growl again, so he headed toward it. As he ducked his head to enter the tunnel, he pulled out his handgun and released the safety.

The growl moved closer to him. The lights illuminating the crime scene faded as he squinted, willing himself to see better in the darkness. The sounds of the police officers echoed around him,

but softer now. He stepped forward, but his shoes didn't grip the ground and he slid. As his arm shot out in an attempt to grab at something and slow his fall, his flashlight raced up the nearest wall to a Wolf's head. Blond and gray fur with dark eyes stared back at him. Blood dripped from long, white, fangs to coat its lips and fur, then dripped down the front of the Wolf's chest, along the wall, and to the ground.

"There's our Wolf," he said, standing and staring at the painting.

"But they got the eyes wrong," a woman said from behind him.

Frank jumped and turned, pulling his gun to him before he pointed it at her. "Kind of makes it more menacing, don't you think?"

"Maybe," she said. "Sorry to sneak up on you, but these tunnels are dangerous. You shouldn't wander off alone down here."

Frank smiled. Dr. Emillio, according to the name tag on her blue overalls, was right. "Any idea yet what killed him?"

She narrowed her eyes as he engaged the safety on his gun and holstered it. "It looks like a broken neck."

Frank shook his head and waved his hand. "But what about all that flesh, missing?"

"Scavengers," she said, then nodded behind Frank. "Captain, I'm ready to move this one. Is the second scene secured?"

Happy walked up to them, wiping sweat off his brow. "Yes. What's this?"

"Our Wolf," said Frank.

"Damn it," said Happy.

Dr. Emillio, staring at the painting, said, "There are no Wolves in the tunnels except painted ones."

"You know," Frank said, scratching his chin, "I recall headlines about a Wolf on the Strip a year or so ago."

"A casino marketing stunt gone wrong," Happy and Dr. Emillio said at the same time.

Frank smiled and raised his hand in surrender. "Got it."

Happy nodded to the back of the tunnel. "Anything else you can

tell me?"

Dr. Emillio shook her head. "Too many people and rodents, plus it's too early to conjecture. Let me get the remains to the lab."

"Come on, Frank," Happy said, walking toward the tunnel entrance, where he addressed the officer standing guard. "No one is to be alone in the tunnels."

Frank snapped a picture of the Wolf painting before following Happy. In the shade of the command truck, Happy pulled two water bottles out of an ice chest.

"Where'd you get the gun?" Happy asked without looking at Frank.

Frank downed half the bottle and sniffed himself. "I stink, but so do you." He pulled out his new Nevada permit . "All legal."

Happy snorted. "You didn't have it this morning."

Frank stared at Ramon's car where it waited at the top of the stairs leading back to the road. "You just didn't see it."

Happy looked up at the road, too, and grunted. "I guess it was better you were armed down there. There's your ride."

"Yup," said Frank. "Need me for anything?"

Frank watched as Happy's face morphed from anger to confusion, and finally back to calm. "You found what you were looking for down there?"

Frank shrugged. "Maybe."

"Damn," Happy whispered to himself more than to Frank. "This is one of those cases I'm not going to like, isn't it?"

"Yup," Frank said, walking away. "I'll keep you posted."

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CHAPTER 3
COUNTDOWN BEGINS: THE WILDES

EUGENE

“Ow! Ow! Ow!” Barked Eugene as she skidded down a slope. Her nails bit into rocks, pebbles, ice, snow, and twigs that sliced through her skin. And then, with a sudden whomp! She stopped.

Catching her breath, she lifted her head. Snow laced her eyelashes and froze to her lips. Pushing her belly off the ground, she balanced on all fours, shook off the ice and grit, and immediately lost her balance and dropped back to her belly. She tried twice more before she balanced low to the ground. First she shook her rear, then her back, and finally her head, letting her tail wag to keep her balance.

Around her, trees lifted great branches filled with gray leaves holding gray clouds filled with snow. She breathed in deep. The scent of cold, rock, and earth filled her brain. Her right ear followed her left ear as they rotated listening to snow landing on limbs, falling leaves, grinding rock, and dirt pushing against rocks. A hare scurried over snow frozen over with wafers of thin ice.

Eugene plopped her butt onto the ground and sighed. “I hate the Wildes.”

Snow billowed and drifted into banks taller than her ears when she stood on two legs. A gray boulder loomed ahead of her, only

distinguished from the sky by a dark strip of sediment. Trees, blanketed in snow, closed their ranks behind her. Eugene licked her bloodiest paw to get the small stones and broken twigs out from between her toes. Something warm, tasty, and filling drifted on the wind: blood. She stood on all fours, raised her hackers, and growled.

"Fresh, flowing: no, slowing. A faint heartbeat: a breath."

Saliva dripped off her lips. Her stomach tightened, but then fear gripped her heart and a whine escaped her. Three feet in front of her, red hair stuck out of the snow. "CC!" Eugene barked.

She circled CC where she lay face down in the snow. Eugene pushed her muzzle against CC's face, forcing her pale face out of the snow.

Eugene raised her head, and perked her ears up. Somewhere above her, among the snow and the gray boulders, pebbles trickled down the side of the mountain.

Eugene shook her head and circled her friend. Blood froze in the snow at CC's thigh. Eugene sniffed the wound. "Good. Cold will stop the bleeding."

She walked to the other side of CC. "Idiot! The cold will kill her."

With a huff, she sat and howled—not her usual refrain, but a short whine for help. Wolves would help…or would they? The Wolves in Vegas tried to kill her. What would they be like here? Phin told her the Wildes was a dangerous place for Wolves. He'd spent enough time here to know, but she didn't pay attention to his stories. She'd never wanted to come back to the Wildes.

She listened, but only the wind answered her as it drowned out the creaking of the trees, the cracking of ice, and the trickling of more pebbles rolling down the hill. At least the snow falling over the mountain slowed. Ahead of her and beneath a small boulder, gray earth glistened with ice, but no snow. That boulder would protect them from the wind.

She grabbed the back of CC's collar and pulled. CC moaned.

Eugene dropped the material and lay on top of her. “I’m killing you, CC. I’m so sorry. I should know what to do.”

CC reached up and touched Eugene’s face, but Eugene didn’t move.

“Eugene? So…cold.”

CC’s eyes didn’t open, but at least she was talking. Eugene breathed into CC’s ear and licked her face. There was no warmth in CC’s breath. Eugene pulled away as CC pointed toward the mountain.

“What’s—?”

Eugene leapt to all fours and spun around baring her fangs and growling. The large boulder had rolled to the side, revealing a crooked opening in the mountain. From the darkness of the cave, a figure shuffled forward.

“Hush!” rattled a voice like stones rumbling down the mountain as the figure lifted a great gnarled staff and hit the ground. “Stupid dogs always howling when they shouldn’t. Stop your growling.” The earth trembled beneath Eugene’s paws, and she stopped growling. “That’s better. Keep her warm! Or do you want to bury your friend in my mountain?”

The figure lifted an enormous foot on a short leg and stepped forward; long toes gripped rock and ice, keeping the figure from slipping. Eugene lay on top of CC, shielding her from the cold and the wind as best as she could, and stared at those long toes coming closer and closer. When their owner arrived, Eugene looked into two round, blue-black eyes sparkling from beneath thick hair and fur. It laughed, and Eugene smiled at the tinkling sound like a smooth stone skipping along a still pond. Long, thick, gray fingers with fur on the knuckles and claws reached for CC, and Eugene started to growl, but didn’t. Instead, she sniffed and lowered her head.

“Shoo!” The figure waved a hand; the other reached forward and lifted CC’s head. CC’s eyes fluttered open.

A great laugh erupted from the creature’s mouth. “Red hair.

They're not going to like you. Whoopee!" The figure's long skirt swirled as she danced a jig. "We don't get to dance too much anymore, ugly mutt. Ol'Sassi's a happy troll today." Eugene put her muzzle next to CC's face, making the woman laugh again. "This will be a tale of tales. She'll live, and Ol'Sassi will sing the song."

As quick as a flutter, Ol'Sassi swished off her fur-lined cloak and wrapped it around CC as she lifted her with short, but strong arms. "Come—not such a stupid mutt after all, are you?"

WITH BARELY A BREATH OF SOUND, the huge boulder rolled over the opening behind Ol'Sassi. In front of her, Eugene jumped and twisted around as the light dwindled into deep shadow.

"Move," Ol'Sassi grumbled as her foot, which was about to step on Eugene, stopped just above her head.

Eugene turned around and trotted to the end of the cave, where a dull light glowed from around a corner. She smelled no fire, only earth, rock, CC, and CC's blood. Ol'Sassi smelled too much like the rocks for Eugene to distinguish her from anything else, but she blamed that on the smell of potatoes, dill, rosemary, carrots, and turnips stewing. Her stomach grumbled as she stopped and stared at a side room lit by a pile of stones glowing in the center of a ring of black stones. Warmth rolled off the stones, melting the ice on her eyelashes. The smell of the stew mixed with the earth, as well as blankets and books and pots.

Eugene fixed her gaze on Ol'Sassi as she walked past her. Small stones trickling down a stream filled the air as Ol'Sassi giggled. "Don't worry, mutt. Your friend lives, and you'll eat soon."

Still carrying CC, Ol'Sassi kicked a low cot from the side of the room close to the glowing stones and laid CC on it. She picked up the black stones circling the glowing ones and placed them under the cot before removing CC's clothes and gathering a pile of blankets to cover all but the wound on the back of her thigh.

“Ah,” Ol’Sassi said, nodding. “Deep. Will heal.” She turned to a bench behind her and picked up a bowl, then held it over the glowing stones. Eugene could have sworn Ol’Sassi ’s eyes rolled up under her thick brow. “Weaver!”

Eugene's hackles rose. She lowered her head and growled. A spider as large as a nightmare crawled out of Ol’Sassi ’s tangled mane of fur and hair until it reached the tip of the old troll’s round nose. A single, glistening thread drifted off her nose, and the spider dropped onto CC’s back. As it crawled toward CC’s exposed wound, its front legs unwound a square piece of pale gray cloth.

“Sit,” grumbled Ol’Sassi, causing the walls of the cave to shake.

Eugene sat, lowering her ears, but her eyes remained fixed on the spider. As Ol’Sassi washed CC’s wound, the spider used its many legs to prod and push the wound until a piece of glass slipped out. Only a trickle of blood seeped out of the wound.

Eugene took two steps closer to the bed, her gaze fixated on Weaver’s legs. They didn’t just push the skin, but they wove a fine, silver thread in and out of CC’s wound to close the open veins and then the skin. Its back legs lay the cloth over the stitches. Ol’Sassi stood and tucked the warm, glowing stones under the blankets. Eugene kept her head down and close to CC, but looked up at Ol’Sassi, who smiled down at her.

“Ow,” CC barely whispered as her head shifted, but didn’t lift. Eugene pushed her nose against her face, and CC blinked and breathed in deeply before touching Eugene’s muzzle. “Eugene?” she croaked a little louder. Then, she wrapped her around Eugene’s neck and propped herself on Eugene’s shoulder. “Where are—ow!”

She turned her head to see what pinched and prodded at her leg. Weaver continued to spin and seal the wound on her thigh. The light from the glowing stones danced in Weaver's many eyes. CC’s face would have paled if she had enough blood left in her. Instead, she fainted.

“CC?” Eugene whined. Ol’Sassi roared with laughter, but Weaver continued to weave. Eugene nestled her head next to CC’s.

“Stupid, ugly mutt,” said Ol’Sassi, settling on a short stool near CC’s feet. “Your friend’ll sleep til morning. Best cure for all ails. Weaver will see to a clean wound.” She ladled stew from the pot into a bowl and set it on the floor. “Eat, then sleep. Cure your own worries. Tomorrow, we’ll tell tales.” Ol’Sassi stirred her stew, staring at something far away before sighing. “Oh yes, we have tales to weave. Stories are grand when the telling is long, and Ol’Sassi has the longest story of them all. Ain’t that right, Weaver?”

Eugene didn’t move, but her stomach rumbled again. Ol’Sassi’s foot pushed the bowl closer to her.

“Now, you don’t have to move so far to eat.”

Eugene ate. Warmth filled her guts and her heart. She licked the last of the stew from the bowl and curled up on the ground beneath CC’s hand, dangling from the cot. Her fingers were warmer, but not as warm as they should have been, but even though CC slept, her fingers started gently scratching Eugene’s head. Eugene licked her lips and at last, she let exhaustion overtake her.

EUGENE RAN, giant snowflakes fluttered from the clouds as the sun inched its way up over the mountains. She couldn’t see it yet, but she felt it as the wind bit a little less with each leap from boulders to the ground. She was ready for the ice this morning; her claws broke thin sheets of it as she ran and ran, releasing the tension in her muscles from the previous day’s unwelcome adventures.

She leaped onto the boulder door of Ol’Sassi’s cave and looked down at the old troll leaning on her giant staff of gnarled wood. It was worn smooth, and had gray rags, furs, and twine wrapped around the parts Ol’Sassi gripped. Eugene stared at the knuckled and furry fingers holding the staff. Ol’Sassi faced east, catching the first rays of the sun. Her cheeks flushed as she opened her eyes that were so deep and black Eugene worried she would get lost if she stared at them for too long.

And then, over the sound of snow falling on leaves, a hare burrowing through ice, and the crackling of Ol'Sassi's breath, Eugene heard a howl. The wind carried it from far away. She tilted her head as another howl answered. Her legs tensed, ready to run toward the songs. Eugene filled her lungs to answer, but Ol'Sassi shook her head.

"No, mutt. They're not ready for you yet."

Eugene sniffed the air. The Wolves were miles and miles away, and she wouldn't leave CC, even if she could walk. Eugene plopped down on the rock and sighed.

"Soon enough," Ol'Sassi said, smiling up at Eugene. "Your friend's waking."

Eugene jumped off the boulder, landing next to Ol'Sassi's feet and those enormous toes, and bumped into the giant staff.

"Careful, mutt. You're young, Ol'Sassi's not."

Eugene trotted down the hall muttering to herself, "Mutt, my ass! Old fart's blind as a bat. Anybody can see I'm no mutt. People tell me all the time I'm a beautiful Wolf, and I am. Mutt indeed."

She stopped and turned when she realized Ol'Sassi wasn't following her. She stood in the entrance staring at Eugene tilting her head from side to side. Her thin lips pursed, and then she smiled.

The sound of a yawn, then CC moving and calling for Eugene echoed in the tunnel.

Eugene ran to CC's side, barking, "CC! You're awake!"

CC pushed herself up and wrapped the heavy blankets around her. Eugene pushed her muzzle into CC's face, sniffing and licking.

CC put her hand on Eugene's face. "What happened?"

"Awake—good!" Ol'Sassi said, taking her seat on the stool next to CC's head. "Mind's working. That's good. Eat now."

She pulled a bowl from the shelf behind her and filled it with stew. CC took it, sniffed, and looked at Eugene. Eugene wanted to tell her to eat, but it came out as a bark, so she pushed her nose against the hand CC held her spoon with. CC put the spoon to her

mouth and sipped, and then, just as Eugene had done the night before, ate as quickly as she could.

"Good appetite. Speeds healing," Ol'Sassi said, filling another bowl and placing it in front of Eugene. "This one didn't want to eat at first either, but Ol'Sassi's too good a cook."

CC set her bowl down and tugged at the heavy cloak. "Thank you. Do you have my clothes?"

"Burned them." Ol'Sassi pointed at the glowing rocks. "Dangerous for you here. Ol'Sassi and Weaver fit you out when it's time to go. Now, heal."

Ol'Sassi laughed her gut full-of-rocks laugh when CC scrunched up her mouth and nose.

Eugene rolled on the ground, laughing. "So predictable," she meant to say, but it came out as, "bark."

"Where are we?" CC asked. Her eyes grew round and she bit her lip. "What is this place? How did we get here? And what happened to C—?"

Eugene once more put her head close to CC's. "We're in the Wildes" she meant to whisper, but it sounded like a whine.

CC reached out to Eugene and stroked her head. "Eugene?"

"An ugly mutt. Been spelled, but you know your friend. That's good." Ol'Sassi poured a cup of tea and handed it to CC. "Good friend, your mutt, and smarter than she looks."

CC sipped her tea and smiled. "Yes, she's a good friend, and I know how smart she is, even when she's trying to hide it. But she's no mutt."

Eugene lifted the corners of her lips and ran her tongue over them. "You tell her, CC," but Eugene realized it sounded an awful lot like a bark.

"Good friend spelled you, child," Ol'Sassi said, squinting at Eugene. "Even hard for Ol'Sassi to tell you're no mutt."

Eugene sat up. She stared at first Ol'Sassie and then CC. A knot formed in her stomach. She coughed a sudden stone that formed in her throat. "What?"

Ol’Sassi smiled. Yellow rocks for teeth gleamed in the light of the glowing stones. “Ol’Sassi knows outworlders when she sees them, and she has no love for the Witches who’d spell you dead if they found you.”

CC dropped her cup. “Witches? Why do they want us dead?”

Ol’Sassi puckered her lips and scratched her chin. “There’s the question Ol’Sassi has no answer for. Your hair’s red, so they’ll make you dead.” She pointed at CC and then Eugene. “Spell smells wrong for a Witch.” She leaned forward and took a long, loud sniff of Eugene. “Goblin? Maybe. Ol’Sassi doesn’t know, but she should.”

Eugene stepped away from Ol'Sassi as the hairs on her spine rose.

CC’s hand, warm from holding the hot cup, stroked her back. “It’ll be okay, Eugene. We’ll get your Wolf back.”

“Get it back,” Eugene whispered.

She backed away from CC and looked at her front right leg, sniffing it. Then she looked and smelled her left leg. She twisted to look at her right hind leg, then her left. Even her tail was frazzled hair of gray. She spun around and around as fast as she could until she grabbed her tail and bit into it. It hurt. “Mine.”

She looked around the room. CC’s hair was red, but her familiar freckles and pink cheeks were nothing but shades of gray.

She yelled as loud as she could, “I’m a mutt! My beautiful tattoos! All Mum’s work. Gone! There’s nothing left of me.” but it was only a series of barks.

CC frowned. "I’m sorry, Eugene, you’re still you. We’ll find—"

She fought the urge, but at last a howl erupted from her. Spittle dripped from her jawline. She shook her head, commanding her human side to rule her heart. She looked at CC and saw fear. Fear raced up and down her spine causing her heart to pound her chest so hard, the others must have heard it. She panted. Her bladder squeezed, and she dashed to the cave’s entrance. The boulder blocked her exit, but she had to get out. She jumped at it again and again, but it didn’t budge. She paced back and forth in front of it.

She scratched it with her claws. She barked at it like a dog, telling the boulder to move. It didn't move.

Despair tugged once and then the fear, the pounding in her chest, the need to run, melted away, and she collapsed onto her stomach, limbs spread wide. She closed her eyes and slept.

OL'SASSI'S VOICE, smooth as a brook flowing over worn stones, drifted through the cave and into Eugene's ears. "Ol'Sassi sees why they want her. Your friend is strong. Whoever spelled her owed her a great favor. "Not easy to hide a Wolf in a dog."

"What kind of danger is she in?" CC's voice sounded stronger than it had when she first woke up.

Eugene lifted her head and stared at the light of the warming stones at the far end of the cave. She looked again at the boulder blocking her way to fresh air, trees, birds, and uncertainty. Standing, she shook the dust from her fur and sneezed. She walked back to the small room where CC and Ol'Sassi huddled by the light of the stones. When there was a problem to solve, CC dove into solutions. She needed Eugene, and Eugene needed her.

"Strong spell on her. Even Ol'Sassi didn't know she was a Wolf at first. How did you know your friend inside that ugly mutt?"

Before laying her head on the cot next to CC's head, Eugene asked, "Good question. How did you know it was me?" But it came out as a moanful whine.

"Sometimes I can see…" CC paused and turned her gaze to Eugene. "Sometimes I can see inside a person. I don't think it's their soul, but like a true self that we all hide deep inside. In Vegas, the Werewolves looked like something was missing from them. I couldn't see their true selves."

Eugene lifted her head. Her ears fell back, and she shifted from one paw to another. She wanted to ask,"But I'm still here, right?" It came out as a high-pitched whine.

CC put her hand on Eugene's head. "I see you, Eugene. Despite your present form, both you and your Werewolf are there."

Eugene let out a long sigh as the tightness in her chest eased.

Ol'Sassi stood, picked up the large staff she used to help her walk, and handed it to CC. "Use this, Stand. The sooner you stand, the sooner you walk, the sooner you go home." She turned to Eugene and nodded. "Very good magic hiding you. Could be Goblin. They form and shape. Someone who doesn't want you hurt or enslaved like the other Wolves."

CC pushed herself up, letting the blanket fall off her shoulders. "Enslaved?"

Ol'Sassi shook her head and leaned over to rearrange the blanket. "Bad business, but you fix it when you heal." Her nose twitched. "Weaver, you finished?"

The giant spider pushed only her head out of the tangled mass on Ol'Sassi's head. Her front legs emerged and held a gray bundle in front of Ol'Sassi's face. Eugene didn't growl, but the hair on her back rose.

Ol'Sassi grabbed the garment. "Tsk, mutt. You don't want your friend walking around naked, do you?"

Eugene backed away as Ol'Sassi helped CC pull the dress over her head. Then, leaning on the staff, CC stood. She swayed, but Ol'Sassi's grip on her arm kept her upright.

CC grimaced. "Ow."

Ol'Sassi helped CC sit. "Rest now. You stand when you've rested more. By end of day, you'll walk around the room. Tomorrow, fresh air. Soon, you'll walk to the High Meadow. You'll fix Mother's magic, free the Wolves, and then go home."

"Woof!" Eugene said, but she wanted to say, "Excuse me?"

"Hang on," said CC. "We're not part of this world. There's nothing—"

Eugene jumped when the clicking of a thousand claws erupted high above their heads.

Ol'Sassi looked up and waved her hand. "Must be done, or

Mother dies. If Mother dies, there is no life."

"Why do you think we can fix anything?" CC asked.

Eugene jumped off the cot and stood in front of Ol'Sassie. "'Red head will get you dead.' Why did you say that? CC can't go walking around the Wildes if her hair's going to get her killed."

Ol'Sassi resumed her place on her stool and leaned in close to Eugene. "Witches don't like redheads. No one here has it." She sat up wearing a toothy grin and chuckled. "They're afraid of her. That's the first advantage."

CC's hand went to her hair. "No one has red hair? How's that possible?"

"When the Witches called for war," Ol'Sassi started, "one clan of humans far off in the west all had hair red as yours. They said no to Witches. Witches killed them all, but not before a few got away to the outer worlds. Vengeance haunts Witches' dreams."

Eugene sat up, her weight bouncing from one front paw to the next. The glow of the stones dimmed, and her breath caught in her throat.

"Witches almost lost their magic because of red-haired heads. Now they fear the heads of red. What is feared is killed," Ol'Sassi said with a shrug. "It's the way of those who walk the surface."

Eugene leaned against CC's legs, then put her head on her lap. The shadows in the room looked too dark, as if light would never push them away.

CC bent over and wrapped her arm around Eugene. "I'm scared, too. We can't save anyone. We don't even know how to save ourselves."

Ol'Sassi filled a bowl with her healing tea and handed it to CC. "Heal first, then walk. Then you save Mother and yourselves."

Eugene breathed in the scent of the tea. Her muscles relaxed and the shadows no longer looked so menacing. She walked to the space between Ol'Sassi's cozy little cave and the tunnel to the outside world.

"This is great. We get flung into the Wildes, CC nearly dies, we

have to save this world to get home, and I have to pee. How am I supposed to do anything without my tattoos?"

Ol'Sassi stood. "Come on, mutt. Let's go outside."

CC said, "We don't know anything about magic."

Ol'Sassi's laugh echoed through the cave. "The mutt knows."

"Don't worry, Eugene," CC yelled from her cot as Ol'Sassi rolled her boulder door open. "We'll get your tattoos back."

Once outside, Eugene trotted ahead of Ol'Sassi, who stretched her neck up to the sky and breathed in a long deep breath. "Tomorrow sunshine, ugly mutt."

Eugene snarled, but didn't growl as she came out from behind a boulder.

Ol' Sassie laughed. "Changes coming. They won't know what to make of you, young Wolf."

EUGENE RAN AS FAST as she could, sometimes sliding on ice, until she reached the tree line and skidded to a stop. She shook the snow and ice from her fur, breathed in the scent of pine, ice, earth, fowl, hares, and deer. Then, she darted in and out of the shadows of the trees. It was the third afternoon since they'd arrived, and the day was bright and cold.

Eugene smiled as Ol'Sassi helped CC hobble to the entrance of the cave, where the sun and wind nipped at her face until her cheeks burned red. Ol'Sassi had periodically led Eugene and CC out for fresh air and sunshine, but never for more than a few minutes at a time. Ol'Sassi claimed Wolves were prowling, but Eugene didn't smell them. Then again, she now had a mutt's muzzle, not her Wolf's.

"Not too far, Eugene," CC said, leaning on Ol'Sassi 's giant staff and smiling in the sunshine.

Ol'Sassi stepped into the sun next to CC. "Smart mutt, but like Wolves, need to run."

”I’m not a mutt,” muttered Eugene.

CC hobbled forward. “She doesn’t like being called a mutt. It’s too bad you can’t see her Wolf. She’s beautiful, and her tattoos change with her.”

Ol’Sassi huffed. “Didn’t know the magic could travel so far. Mother’s arms are long.” She grabbed CC’s arm as her foot slipped. “Don’t fall and burst open wound. Weaver says she won’t stitch you closed again.”

Eugene barked out a laugh as CC’s eyes bulged at the thought of Weaver once more sewing up her leg. “How long before I can walk well enough to get to the High Meadow?”

“Weeks,” said Ol’Sassi.

Eugene slammed her paws into the ground, flinging snow around her as she barked, “Weeks?”

“Weeks,” repeated CC. “We don’t have weeks.”

Ol’Sassi’s laughter rippled through Eugene like rocks tumbling down a hill. “Spells work fast. Tomorrow, you go.”

Eugene ran up the mountainside as CC said, “Good. I’m ready to get moving.”

“One spell left,” Ol’Sassi said, waving to Eugene. “Get in here, mutt. There’s work to do.”

As they returned to the warm cave, Weaver leaped out of Ol’Sassi’s hair and onto CC’s head. She pulled out a long strand of her hair, then returned to Ol’Sassi’s head.

“Ow!” shouted CC. “What was that for?”

Eugene cocked her head to the side as Weaver answered in clicks and whispers.

“Well,” CC replied, “tell me before you need to do something like that next time.” She leaned on the great staff as she bent over to rest first her left hip, then her right hip on the cot. She grinned. “I can sit again.”

Eugene sat in front of CC and looked her in the eye. “How long have you known what I was saying?”

“I—” CC’s chin dropped. “How do I know what Eugene and

Weaver are saying?"

Ol'Sassi's laugh filled the small cave. "Magic." She moved around the cave, picking up sticks and fabric and finally sitting on her stool to put them together. "Staff from first root of First Tree. She shares what she knows."

Eugene sniffed the thick staff. Weaver gripped the top of it and wove CC's stolen hair around its top.

"Cool! And I bet that's why I see your red hair."

CC scratched her head. "Very cool…I think."

"Talk less," said Ol'Sassi. "Sleep, rest. Ol'Sassi has much to do." She stood, shuffling to the back of the cave until she disappeared in a dark corner. "Where is it? Weaver, where did you put it?"

Eugene didn't try to follow her movements. Exhaustion wove through every muscle in her body. CC stroked her back; her fingers raked through her fur to reach her skin, but her strokes were uneven and cold.

Ol'Sassi lumbered to her stool. "You worry, so let Ol'Sassi tell you a story."

Eugene stretched out on her belly, but remained close enough for CC to continue to scratch her back while she stared up at Ol'Sassi.

"Once upon a time," Ol'Sassi said and then winked at Eugene. "All good stories start that way. We followed the sun and stars. They guided us to plant and sow, sleep and wake. Goblins tunneled in the earth. Wolves ran through forests and plains, up the hills and down the mountains. Humans laughed with us and sowed with us. Witches healed and spelled to comfort. Some humans learned to harvest the magic Mother gives. Became Wizards. Studied with Witches and sometimes old Trolls."

Weaver dropped like an earring from Ol'Sassi's ear and settled on her shoulder. Ol'Sassi scratched Weaver's back, and Weaver's many legs flexed in and out as a silver thread ran between her legs, growing thicker and longer.

CC's voice, sleepy but sure, said, "The Wizards did something

they shouldn't have."

Ol'Sassi nodded. "Mother gives us light, and light gives us magic. But outside of light is shadow. There, things hide in plain sight, around corners and behind our eyes where we do not look. Wizards looked. Spun spells. Twisted shadows."

Eugene looked at Ol'Sassi. "They became vampires."

Ol'Sassi hissed as she blew steam off a ladle of stew she held to her mouth and smiled. "We called them Shadow-Walkers because they would not walk in the sun. They guarded our nights, and we slept in peace."

The bubbling of the stew filled the void left by Ol'Sassi's silence.

"What happened?" CC whispered.

Ol'Sassi lifted her chin. "Witches didn't like them because they didn't make them. Said Wizards were bad, made bad things, and broke Mother's magic. And so it seemed to be. Shadow-Walkers needed life to live, although they did not kill. Mother's magic diminished. Crops failed. Winter came too soon. The trees went to sleep, and so did many Trolls. Like now, winter storms cover spring's offerings, the earth shakes because it can. For no reason, the seasons blend into one. Ol'Sassi stayed awake. Walks alone."

Weaver hissed. Eugene lifted her head to see a thin coil of silvery thread fall onto the floor from Ol'Sassi's lap. She walked over, lifted the ball with her teeth, and placed it back on Ol'Sassi 's lap.

Ol'Sassi smiled at her. "Ol'Sassi thought the Witches must be right, but it didn't feel right, so she didn't go to sleep. She climbed the mountains and found a Shadow-Walker. We talked and talked, night after night after night. I gave her what she needed to live, and she showed me stars I'd never seen because they were hidden in the dark. I knew her heart was good, but Witches still called them cruel and evil. Humans only knew Witches gave while Shadow-Walkers took. They could not not see what Shadow-Walkers gave."

CC asked, "And the Werewolves?"

"At first, Witches and Humans hunted Wizards: killed them or

chained them. Punished them for creating life that lived in shadows. Then some Werewolves joined the Witches, rewarded with gems of magic and promises of power. Those with gems were doomed. Took too long for those without to see. It even took too long for Ol'Sassi to see."

Eugene whined. "Never accept gifts from Witches."

CC looked from Ol'Sassi to Eugene. "But some got away and made their way to our world with the Vampires."

Ol'Sassi squinted and brought her face close to CC's. She sniffed. "Yes, Shadow-Walker. That's what I smelled on you." She scratched her furry chin and tilted her head from side to side. As if she remembered she wasn't alone, she added, "So, some survived. You align with them: a curious development. Thought they all died…so many died."

Eugene paced around the warming stones mumbling, "We're missing something. Phineas has been here, and I did once, too, so others must come and go between the worlds. How and why? This crazy old troll's not telling us everything."

CC cleared her throat. "Eugene!"

Ol'Sassi chuckled from deep inside her ample chest. "Must know all and must know now, eh? Well, Ol'Sassi will tell you what she knows. Goblin friend comes to me saying so much is bad, must act. Me, I am a trickster, and now witches are tricksters. They turn us against each other. We must save the Shadow-Walkers and free the Werewolves before we, like the Wizards, are all gone. So, Ol'Sassi and her Goblin friend seek other friends. We seek the Heart of Mother's magic and find Witches chaining her with spells that turn Mother's Heart heavy and weary. Still, Mother shows us what to do. We wake the skies to cry and soften the earth. We wake sleeping Trolls. They dig roots so deep they hug Mother. We give her our magic and she, in turn, divines the deepest root. Life bursts a hole through darkness that connects all the worlds, but it glows too bright. Instead of making a passage to life for Shadow-Walkers, it killed them…or so we thought.

“Witches cut down so many Shadow-Walkers: blood ran, flesh rotted. They might have stood against the Witches if we had helped sooner. But then a new voice whispers from the shadows. My friend, the one I met so long ago, found a way to twist shadows, to move through Mother’s embrace protected from her light. Others learned to twist the shadows, but weren’t strong enough to travel Mother’s song. The last of them slides into the passage. I thought them all dead, but you know them.”

CC nodded. “They still need the blood of Humans to survive, but some have learned to take and not kill.”

Eugene closed her eyes and recalled the ball of light heading for the casino. She remembered the gold and green light, and Cesar’s last words. She tilted her head and looked at CC.

CC nodded. “When we were attacked at the casino the Vampire who was with us said he couldn’t come with us. All the light blinded me, but he was in shadow.” CC stopped and closed her eyes. “Do you think…?”

Ol’Sassi shook her head as CC trailed off and opened her eyes. “Probably dead, but maybe he knew how to twist shadows.”

CC pushed herself up to her elbows. “He’s too smart not to know how.”

Eugene stood in front of Ol’Sassi and pounded her front paws on the earth. “Of course he is. And we’re going to save the Werewolves and get home.”

CC stared into the dimming light of the stones and murmured, “He’s got to be alive.” Seeing Eugene looking at her, she shrugged. “You know, if you’d told me last year you’d be a dog and a giant spider would sit on my ass, I would have laughed.”

Ol’Sassi laughed. “Opening minds—good! Rest, heal, then you will fix the magic and restore balance. Then you go home.”

EUGENE WATCHED from the top of the boulder at the entrance to

Ol'Sassi's cave. The sun stretched its first rays over the forest. Miles and miles of trees and hills stood between them and their destination. As she squinted, she could just make out a sparkling silver thread where a river ran through the forest, separating the mountain range from a valley. Beyond that, it was more hills, more trees, more distance. She sighed.

"How will we make it to the High Meadow without being caught or killed?"

CC walked out of the cave like Ol'Sassi said she would, but she needed the support of Ol'Sassi's great staff, which was now covered with torn rags and bits of string.

"What do you see, mutt?" Ol'Sassi called from below.

Before Eugene jumped down, CC gasped. "It's beautiful."

"Won't think so in a day or two, when you're tired and hungry and they're watching you." Ol'Sassi wrapped a stained, torn, black cloak that matched the old wrappings around the staff over CC's shoulders. "Mutt, you gone deaf? Is anyone about?"

Eugene growled as she hopped off the ledge and landed in front of Ol'Sassi . "No," she said and sat at her feet.

"Good." Ol'Sassi nodded, then leaned back against the mouth of the cave. When she spoke, it was after a long intake of air. "Remember: a red head gets you dead. I've done what I can. And you, mutt."

Ol'Sassi bent over and held her hand out to Eugene, who raised an eyebrow. She couldn't understand how anyone wouldn't see CC's red hair, or how CC was supposed to carry the pack of food on her back when she still needed to use the staff. Then Ol'Sassi coughed, and the earth shifted beneath Eugene's paws. She put her front paws on Ol'Sassi's massive chest and sniffed her face.

Ol'Sassi stroked her head. "It's alright, Wolf. I know what you are, and I'm glad for it, but watch yourself. Don't let them know what you are until it's time."

Eugene barked at CC. "She's sick."

CC only nodded as Ol'Sassi rose to her full height and lifted her

arms to the sky.

“It’s time to set things right. Go east toward the river. You’ll find the Westest Road soon enough. All roads end at the High Meadow. Hold out your palm. Honor the ancients is what Humans say. Especially unlucky to refuse a hag on the road. Look for merchants. They travel fast and don’t want bad luck. And, they don’t ask questions.”

Eugene huffed and turned away from Ol’Sassi, but stopped as the sounds of rocks sliding down a hill offered one last piece of advice. “Twenty-four days before the next alignment. Must be fixed before that happens.”

Eugene growled. “Are you kidding me? She’s just telling us this now?”

“What?” CC croaked.

Eugene ran to CC, but she wasn’t CC anymore. In her place stood an old woman with long, gray hair matted and hanging down her back in a thin, wiry braid. The old woman’s shoulders were hunched forward, forcing her head below her neck. A long, pointed nose hooked over pale, thin lips even as dark eyes, glazed over with cataracts, sank into her face. Eugene let out a long breath. The transformation was complete.

Eugene sniffed. “You even smell old.”

Pale cheeks gleamed in the sun on a face full of wrinkles instead of freckles. Dull eyes sat inside deep sockets encased in paper-thin skin, but they twinkled from behind long, loose strands of gray hair. Eugene stepped back as CC parted her thin lips, revealing missing and broken teeth.

“What do you think?” CC asked Eugene.

Eugene tilted her head. “Don’t offer any little girls apples.”

Ol’Sassi laughed, and Eugene spun around as CC joined in. “You can’t fool them all,” Ol’Sassi said, “but you’ll fool most. Be quiet, and don’t be seen.”

CC lifted a thin, knobby finger off the giant staff and tried to pass it back to the troll. “Thank you for everything.”

Ol'Sassi shook her head. "No, child. Old bones don't move as fast as young ones. Take it, but keep it wrapped. A useful tool for hags."

CC lifted one foot and set it in front of her, then stopped, using the giant staff as support. "Are you sure there's nothing—?"

Eugene's eyes itched. She rubbed her paws over them as though to wipe away tears and realized Ol'Sassi had used the last of her magic to help them. She ran to Ol'Sassi, but she stepped into her cave, and the giant boulder rolled across the doorway.

Eugene turned to CC when she heard a sniffle and found her leaning into the giant staff, letting its weight help move her forward.

"This is going to take me a while to get used to, mutt."

"Hey!" Eugene barked.

"From now on, we're on our own: an ancient in need of food and a lift for herself and her an ugly mutt."

TEASER

Teaser hit the ground, rolled, and landed on both feet. "Ari! Arika!"

He lifted his hand to his mouth to yell again, but stopped. His long, green fingers extended from thin green hands. His shoulders slumped.

"Home again."

"Teaser!" Ari's voice flew on the wind landing in ears of green.

Teaser tilted his head, listening. "Close."

"Teaser!" Arika's voice tinkled on the snowflakes falling onto his green head.

Teaser tilted his head letting his long left ear twitch in the wind.

"Not close."

Ari's voice, louder this time, yelled, "Arika! Teaser!"

"Ari!" Arika's voice faded further away this time.

Teaser pounded his feet, shaking snow out from between his green toes. A boulder answered with a thump, and Teaser jumped

on top of it. Ahead of him was a wall of snow. Behind him, snow filled every voice and shadow. He sniffed again, filling his lungs.

“Ari, I’m coming! Stay where you are.”

The whiff of Ari on the wind hinted at the fear filling the boy’s core, but also determination and a hint of bravery.

“Teaser, where are you?” Ari’s voice called.

Teaser couldn’t resist smiling. “There’s strength in that voice: fear, but strength.”

He jumped off the boulder and hit the ground at a run. Ari’s scent grew stronger, but the scent of humans drifted close to him, too. He had to find Ari before they did.

“Get back inside, you old goat,” a woman yelled, her voice coarse with age and worry.

“I thought I heard—”

“Tell me about it when you get inside. I’m freezing my tits off in this wind.”

Teaser stopped and twisted his ears, listening to all he could hear.

“Not looking for the twins. Good." He allowed himself only a moment to breathe and then continued to run.

Ari’s scent filled his brain, but with each step he took, his charge’s fear grew stronger. He ran as fast as he could with the wind and snow pushing him away from the boy. He leapt over a drift taller than himself.

He rolled down the embankment to a creek that flowed swiftly with ice dams forming in its eddies. Two hands grabbed his shoulders, stopping him from rolling into the water. He craned his neck and smiled to see Ari’s face. At first, he was smiling, but it faded into something else as he backed away, his eyes wide, and let go, dropping Teaser into the water.

“What are you?” asked Ari.

Teaser crawled out of the water, while shaking off the water on his back and out of the fur around his neck . “It’s alright Ari—”

Ari turned to run up the embankment.

Teaser jumped to his feet and grabbed the back of one of his heels, pulling him down. “It’s me, it’s Teaser. Come on, we don’t have time for this.”

Ari stopped struggling against the hands holding him. “Teaser? What—I mean, how?”

Teaser pulled Ari to standing. “There is much for you to learn, and much for you to do. But let us find someplace warm before we freeze to death.”

Teaser turned, pulling Ari behind him, but the boy grabbed Teaser’s shoulder.

“Wait! Where’s Arika? I can’t leave her out here.”

Teaser lifted his long nose and sniffed: Wolves. “She’s safe for now. We must go.”

“Teaser?”

The Goblin turned and snarled at him. “When you are safe, we will talk. Come!”

Ari nodded and followed with his head hanging, but whether it was from cold or fear, Teaser wasn’t sure. He did know that their teeth chattered, and it was either move or die. The Wolves had found Arika, or they would soon. She would be safe. Had the Wolves found Ari, he would already be dead.

ARI CUPPED his hands around the bowl of hot soup. Teaser sneezed. The dusty blanket over his shoulders smelled of horses, cats, dogs, and mice, but he watched Ari in the glow of the lighting stone sitting on the rafter next to his head, its glow dancing over his skin even as the smell of the thick soup filled their noses and their stomachs with warmth.

“Are the whites of my eyes still white?” Ari asked.

Teaser hid his grin and the roll of his eyes. Time was a luxury they didn’t have. “Yes, and before you ask me again, yes, your teeth are still white.”

Ari raised the bowl to his lips, but stopped. “And Arika?”

“Blue or green or red or something in between. I don’t know. Of course,” he shifted his legs and straightened his back. “She could be just like she was in the Outer World.”

“How many worlds are there?”

Teaser sighed, mumbling to himself, “Let the young ask. It’s what they do.” Clearing his throat, he spoke at an even pace, slower than last time, letting his words sink in and calm his young charge. “Seven, including the Wildes, but we don’t know the number of Inner Worlds—not for certain. You’re a vital part of this world, Ari: you and Arika. That is why it’s been so important you remain in contact with Mother, and thus the ceremony to touch her on your birthdays and other special times.”

“What went wrong?” Ari asked.

“Someone attacked the casino, and—”

“You have your suspicions, but you’re not going to tell me - right now.”

The farmer’s wife who gave Teaser the soup dimmed the lighting stone in the window of her house.

Teaser grinned and lowered the light of their own stone with a wave of his hand. “Let us sleep while we can. We have much to do and far to go in the days ahead.”

He pushed hay over Ari’s legs.

Ari gulped the last of the soup and lay down.

“Amazing how warm it is inside all this hay.”

“Yes,” said Teaser, stretching out onto his back next to him.

“And we’re going to have a long talk tomorrow,” Ari said after a deep yawn and stretch.

“Yes,” said Teaser. “You have much to learn.”

He put his hand behind his head and stared through a crack in the barn’s ceiling. No snow obstructed the view, and the wind had settled into a soft song through the crack. The clouds cleared, flooding the snow covered ground with moonlight like a glittering dream.

“I hope we have enough time.”

THE FARMER’S oldest hen agreed to keep watch over Ari for the very reasonable fee of a handful of sweet corn. She was not the only beast in the barn to complain about how the growing season was unkind to the farmer, and they shared fewer and fewer scraps with the chickens each day. When Teaser pulled a handful of blackberries out of his pocket, she agreed to nudge the old cockalorum to sound a warning should anyone approach.

The plow horse confirmed Teaser’s suspicions that the farm rested on the edge of a village. He jogged down the worn trail and stopped at the wooden bridge over the tributary that fed into the Great River. Curtains fluttered from windows of a dozen homes lining the single road that passed through the town. A few windows glowed with charging hearthstones so they’d be ready to warm the houses and cook the morning bread.

In the center of the town, the casino, where the townsmen gathered to sing and dance, to play, to feed the magic the village’s Witch needed to protect it. The windows on the ground floor of the casino were dark and shuttered, but above the door, a single window was open, and the soft light of hearthstones poured out. On the other side of the road, a leaning, two-story building with many dark windows waited to wake as two boys exited the front door and crossed the road to the stables.

Teaser looked around him before wiggling his fingers and changing his form. Gone was his luscious green hue, the golden buttons of honor, and his most glorious green suit; all were replaced with the dull, monotonous cream and beige tones the humans who lived in this village favored. He picked up a large stick and broke it in half. Leaning on it, he hobbled over the bridge, adjusting the tattered scarf over his shoulder so it wrapped around his wrinkled neck and his long, shaggy beard.

The door to the first house he passed opened, and he furrowed his thick, unruly eyebrows to hide his eyes.

"Well met, Grandfather." The woman smiled with her mouth, but not her eyes, and she didn't wave him in.

Teaser nodded and continued along the road until one of the boys he'd noticed earlier stepped out of the stable.

"Good morning, Grandfather," he said. Unlike the woman at the other end of the road, this boy's smile shone from his mouth and his eyes.

"Morn'n," Teaser nodded in reply and continued along the road.

"Wait!" called the boy. He took off his hat and motioned Teaser toward the inn. "Come inside and get some breakfast. We've a full house, and plenty of bread to go around today."

Teaser chucked. "A bit of bread'll be welcome."

The boy ran ahead and held the front door open as Teaser groaned and took the front three stairs one at a time.

"Pops!" the boy called, directing Teaser to an empty table near the door. "Don't think I've ever seen us have so many come through. There've been lots of soldiers, but they pay. Had you come a week ago, we might've had nothing for you, but you'll find your fill this morning. Pops! Mums!"

The boy jogged through a room filled with soldiers and merchants eating and chatting. Teaser plopped down on the chair with a loud moan and kept his head bowed low. Through his long eyebrows, he searched the soldiers for any sign of recognition. None of them bore the marks of Wolf Soldiers, but Teaser risked a deep sniff. No Werewolves here. He let his shoulders drop an inch and leaned back in his chair.

The soldiers' captain stood with a groan, rubbing his head as he motioned at a table of sergeants, who rose and began bellowing orders. In barely a breath, the soldiers all grabbed the last of the bread on their tables and made for the door. The captain swallowed the last of his beer in one gulp—all except what dribbled down his chin, staining the front of his tunic.

As he walked out, the captain stopped in front of Teaser's table, pulled a coin from his purse, and set it on the table. "Here, Grandfather. I need all the luck I can get."

He followed his soldiers out the door, and Teaser put the coin in a pocket as a smiling woman with rosy cheeks placed a bowl of warm stew and a loaf of bread with fresh butter in front of him.

"Here you go, Grandfather, and don't mind the soldiers," she said. "They've been coming and going all week looking for something, but they won't say what. Although that captain has a few good stories to tell when he's had a few drinks in him."

Teaser grinned at the woman. "Who doesn't love a story?"

The woman took the invitation and sat across from him. "Well, with all the strange weather that's been going on, the farmers don't know what to do. Some took the risk and planted last week, only to have that storm blow in yesterday. I don't have to tell you how that is. And then the shakings and moaning of Mother. Our Witch says the balance is off, and we've spent more than a few nights in the casino singing and dancing to try and help her heal, but I don't think it's doing much good since our hearts are not in it anymore. But, the old Witch says yes, so we do." The woman shrugged. "Anyway, soldiers started showing up late last week looking for something and they won't say what, but more keep coming, always worn out and frustrated. Last night, that captain was all nasty, snarling that this whole thing is a waste of time. That's when he started drinking and let slip about orders to round up any Goblins they come across. Says it's their fault Mother's out of balance. Now, have you ever heard of anything so silly? Why, the captain's half Goblin himself. Our witch had to put up wards to keep Goblins out at first, but they gave him such a headache that she took them down. I suppose she'll put them back up now."

"Curious," Teaser said, nodding. "Thank you for the story and the breakfast, but I need to get on. Far to go and if there's another storm…"

The woman shrugged, but smiled. "Do as you like, but I

wouldn't want to be on the road nowadays. Lots of merchants are heading to the High Meadow for the Alignment. Why don't I ask around for a ride for you? Plenty would like a bit of luck. "

Teaser scratched at the thick beard on his chin. "I'll catch one at the crossroads. Can't refuse me there."

He laughed, and the woman laughed with him.

As he left the Inn, he ducked into the stable. The boys there were fixing harnesses to horses and carts. He slipped into the closest cart and rummaged through their sacks until he found clothes for Ari. As he snuck out through the back of the stable, the town's old witch hobbled down the road, tapping her staff in front of each house to reset the spell to keep Goblins out.

"And in," he muttered, watching the staff pull green swirls of light from the ground and connect to form a fence along the road. He shook his head. "Things are not well here."

The rooster from the farm where he'd left Ari crowed, "Your boy's awake! Your boy's awake!"

Teaser crossed the bridge and dashed into the trees near the river before running back to the farm without bothering to change his form.

WHEN IT WAS time to go, Teaser offered the farmer a few pennies from his pocket, but he wouldn't take them.

"Go on," the man said. "Don't care what that old Witch says. Goblins are friends."

Teaser bowed. When he stood upright, he'd returned to his lovely green complexion with his perfectly pointed nose. "Thank you. How did you know?"

"The boy," the man chucked. "Chickens might have kept him in the loft, but I saw him looking out the trap. Don't worry," he added as Teaser's eyes widened. "None of the others did, but it'd be better if you got on."

Teaser nodded again and jogged into the barn. “Ari, get down here! We need to go.”

“I can’t!” Ari yelled back. “These chickens attack me every time I move to the ladder.”

Teaser pulled the small bag he’d taken from the stable out of his pocket. From it, he poured sweet corn on the floor of the barn. The old hen clucked, and all the others dropped out of the loft to eat their fill. The old hen perched above them, watching, nodded to Teaser as Ari climbed down. Only then did she join her sisters and daughters.

“We must depart with haste,” Teaser said. “Hold your questions until we have left this farm with its good and not-so-good neighbors.”

They ran as far as they could along the hedges and stone fences, keeping low until they reached the last field that stood between them and the safety of the forest. Teaser stuck his nose in the air and sniffed. He lifted his head over the final gate and squinted as he looked all around. His ears perked up and twisted in two different directions at once.

“Run,” he whispered before bouncing over the fence.

Ari barely needed to jump to get over the fence, thanks to his long legs. He passed Teaser and didn’t stop until he reached the trees. Once he was inside the tree line and behind a thicket of branches and brambles, Teaser plopped to the ground to catch his breath.

Ari, doing the same, asked, “Why do we need to run and hide?”

Teaser reached into the rucksack and pulled out an apple. “This will suffice for the moment,” he said, handing it to Ari. “A proper meal later.” Teaser stood, pulling clothes out of the rucksack. “Clothing makes the man, does it not?”

“What are these?” Ari asked, wrinkling his nose.

“Your current clothing is not appropriate for a Goblin at home in the Wildes.” Teaser motioned for Ari to remove his torn shirt and what was left of his jacket. “And it is much too small for your new

size."

Ari pulled the blue tunic over his head, but it only reached halfway to his knees. "Home?"

"You are home, Ari. You and Arika were born in the Wildes."

Ari sat back to pull soft boots over his feet. "They're kind of small."

Teaser squatted next to him and placed his hand on his shoulder. "This is not how we meant for you to return to your home."

"Home?" shouted Ari.

Teaser cringed. "Please—"

"How can I be home when I've never had one?" Ari continued to shout. "You and our aunt kept us locked up in the tower. We only left when we went to school. Was that a home? Is she even our aunt? Why should I care where we are now when I don't even know this place? And why aren't we looking for Arika?"

Teaser shook his head. "Your anger is justified. You were told nothing of your birth, or your place in this world. So much was left unsaid, but not out of fear for what the knowledge meant." Teaser turned away from Ari and stared into the forest, still dark despite the rising sun. "Your aunt decided you should not know what you now need the most. Both myself and Jonesy wanted to prepare you, but we were forbidden from doing so. The attack on the casino, while not unexpected by myself or Jonesy, provoked actions which now place me in the position of telling you everything." Ari opened his mouth to speak, but Teaser said, "I will inform you of all I can, but we must discuss and walk at the same time. Look beyond the trees and hedges to the farm from whence we departed in such haste."

Ari pushed aside branches until he could see the farm. The old couple moved around their garden, a few kids ran up and down the road, and an old woman walked up the path toward them. People in the village were also out and about.

Teaser put a hand on Ari's head. "Close your eyes. This much

magic I will use that you may see why we fled as we did."

Teaser closed his eyes. Using his toes to guide his thoughts, he sought the sound of Mother's song. His throat repeated the tune in such a whisper that even Ari, whose ear was close to Teaser's mouth, could barely hear him, but Teaser sent the song to Ari.

"Breath deeply, and as your lungs reach capacity, open your eyes."

Ari grimaced for a moment, but did as Teaser said. When he opened his eyes, the road from the village no longer reflected the morning sun. Green beams of light arched over the road, crossing others as they spread to cover the houses and the land along the road. The quaint, lovely village almost glowed under a dome of green light.

"What is it?" he asked.

"A spell," Teaser sighed, removing his hand from Ari's head.

"The beams are gone," said Ari.

"I broke the connection. You must learn to see spells. It is vital to your survival."

Ari stared at Teaser. "What kind of spell?"

"To keep Goblins out. Thus, it would also keep Goblins in, and we would not wish to be in this place for long." Teaser shook his head. "Now, affix your boots. They are not too small, they are merely different from what you are accustomed. We must be gone before the solderers return, especially if we were seen by anyone other than the farmer who housed us."

Ari sat back and pulled until the soft boots slipped over his feet. Teaser showed him how to tie a long cord around and up the fabric until it was wrapped tight from his ankle to his knee.

"We have to find Arika," Ari said as soon as he stood.

Teaser turned to the forest. "I no longer hear her calls. The birds whisper of Witches gathering, flying through the night. We must move forward and trust in her wits to survive. They will welcome her…for now."

Ari straightened his back until he stood at his full height. "No,

Teaser. I'm not just going to blindly follow you without knowing she's okay."

Teaser nodded and began walking. "Your aunts will not allow anything ill to befall their niece. This I know."

"Aunts?" said Ari, hurrying to catch up. "How many aunts do we have?"

Dianttha

Thunder boomed, rattling the tiny glass bottles she'd so carefully arranged along the top shelf. Dianttha shuddered. "Not a natural storm." She closed her eyes, took in a slow, deep breath, and listened. There, mixing with the howling wind and the pelting rain, was a song. She breathed it in, let it fill her mind. It swirled and clashed with other songs, some for protection, some for warmth, some for—

The door to the small room at the top of the tower where she made her potions and perfumes for the great ladies of the High Coven banged open. Lady Uflora, with her long, white gown covered with a worn traveling cloak, glared at her.

"We fly!" she yelled. "The princess is found! Bring your kit."

She withdrew as quickly as she entered, and Dianttha didn't hesitate. She threw on her travel coat and ran down the stairs as fast as she could, and burst out into the courtyard. Rain slapped her face, biting her with cold. Everyone was in motion: running, carrying, filling wagons with supplies. Soldiers ran out through the gates, while High Guardsmen mounted and surrounded the supply wagons. Her father would be near; she had to see him before she left, but her eyes were fixed on the sky. With each flash of lightning, more witches than she'd ever seen flying at once filled the sky.

She pulled the hood of her cloak over her head as rain, thunder, and cold battled to stop her. She raced across the courtyard where the captains stood around Queen Diviva, who directed them with

precision. Her father, Captain Maël, stepped out of the circle, shouting to his unit. He stopped when one of his sergeants pointed at Dianttha. He looked up, his dark eyes reflecting the lightning, and shook his head.

Dianttha moved to stand next to Lady Uflora, directing the loading of the wagons, and curtsied. “My lady.”

Lady Uflora didn’t look at her. “A pack across the river found her; their Witch sent word. She’s hurt, but alive. She could have frozen to death up there. When we find the Goblins that did this—” She halted long enough to look down her long, straight nose at Dianttha’s face, even though they were the same height. “Be ready for anything. It will take two days for the wagons to get there. As the princess’s personal companion, I expect you to be at her side at all times. She knows nothing of the Wildes.”

“Yes, my lady,” Dianttha said. “Shall I see to the brooms?”

Lady Uflora shook her head, not bothering to hide the roll of her eyes. “Already done: be ready to leave with the queen.”

Despite the unnatural storm striving to keep them grounded, Dianttha smiled looking forward to flying. She’d had little opportunity since arriving at the High Tower, and she had her midnight purple cloak spelled to always keep her warm and dry: a gift from her late mentor, Lady Goba.

In a few hours, she’d finally meet the princess everyone was excited to meet…except her.

“BUT I’M GREEN!” screamed the chubby little princess.

It was all Dianttha could do to not insist she give it a rest, but Queen Diviva remained calm, patient, and pleasant even as she laughed and took the girl’s hands in hers.

“And a lovelier shade of green, I’ve rarely seen in a girl.”

Arika sniffed. “But I’m not green at home.”

“My dear,” the queen soothed as she put her arm around Arika’s

shoulders. “This is your true home, where you’ve always belonged. I know it’s confusing, but I’ve been waiting so long to have you near. I don’t care what color you are. You’re as beautiful as your Aunt Ekricia said you were, and even more beautiful than I imagined.” The queen turned to Dianttha. “Bring another warming stone. She’s still shivering.”

Dianttha pulled another stone from the pile she’d formed on the hearth, wrapped it in cloth, and tucked it under Arika’s feet after feeling them to make sure blood once again flowed as it should. “There, you’ll be warm soon. I’m glad you’re with us.”

The girl’s green eyes were pretty, and so wild and wet, so filled with fear and pain and confusion, that Dianttha couldn’t help but smile at the girl with a genuineness she seldom felt, a feeling she’d tried to hide since she’d arrived to serve the High Coven.

Arika’s voice betrayed no evidence that she was warming to Dianttha or her aunt. “Thank you,” she muttered as she burrowed her head deeper into the queen’s shoulder. “Have you found Ari yet?”

Dianttha handed the queen a cup of tea meant to soothe and bring sleep.

“Drink this, my dear,” said the queen. “Doesn’t it taste good? Dianttha’s very clever at making sleeping teas. This will make much more sense once you’re warm and rested.”

Dianttha turned away to place the pot closer to the warming stones. She bit the side of her cheek, reminding herself to hide her feelings; she’d never received a compliment from the queen before.

“It’s good.” Arika yawned, and after a few more sips, her eyes drooped. “But Ari?”

The queen lay Arika’s head on the pillow and tucked the blanket up to her chin. “You know your duties,” she said to Dianttha.

As the queen opened the door to walk out, Arika mumbled, “I have to find Ari…”

The queen’s nostrils flared and her eyes narrowed as she looked back at the sleeping form on the bed. “I’ll find him.”

Dianttha released a heavy sigh. In all the preparations for Arika's arrival, no one had said a word about her brother. Shaking off the chill, she removed her wet stockings, hung them over the back of the old chair, and slid it close to the hearth. Lady Gobo's cloak had kept her warm, but it didn't stop the rain from making its way into her boots or up her sleeves from clinging to her skin and turning to ice. She set her old boots next to the hearth and put small, heated stones in the toe of each.

"I've got to figure out how Lady Gobo spelled the cloak so I can do the same to these," she mumbled. The princess murmured in her sleep, and Dianttha touched her forehead and chubby cheeks. "No fever."

"Ari? Teaser? Where are you?" she mumbled, as the potion drove the princess deeper and deeper into sleep, her words became less and less intelligible.

Dianttha shook her head and sighed. "She's in shock, poor thing."

Dianttha put her ear to the door: hushed voices, slow footsteps, quick ones, and paws padded along the old wooden floor. The queen and Lady Uflora were likely close by, but they spoke too softly for her to hear them. Only the voice of the old witch that ran the casino, Lady Holly, was audible.

"They're all pleased to see you, my queen. Had I known you'd come yourself to fetch—"

Lady Uflora's voice interrupted. "The High Guard will arrive tomorrow. Keep your Wolves on the lookout for Goblins."

"Yes, my lady," said a male voice.

Dianttha heard the fear in the man's voice. The arrival of the High Guard meant recruitments. Those that didn't volunteer would be forced.

She moved back to the bed, staring down at the very young, green face sleeping on the pillow, Its owner no longer mumbling or troubled as she traveled sweet dreams of forgetfulness. Dianttha closed her eyes, took a deep, cleansing breath, and released it as she

opened her ears and heart to the songs of this place. Lady Holly's song fluttered all around her, stronger than Dianttha imagined it would be for such an old witch. She easily dismissed the songs of the queen and Lady Uflora; they were only power, and they boomed over every other song around her, but Dianttha was used to them. The songs of this casino where the inhabitants of the village, most of whom were Wolves, sang and danced and gambled, were not as strong as she expected they'd be. Perhaps Lady Holly required little of them. "Most likely, they've given up."

She shook her head to banish the thought and pushed those songs away. There, like the tinkle of a spring bubbling out of a mountain, was Arika's song. It flowed gently, massaging Dianttha's weary head as it mingled with the song of Mother.

Dianttha settled in an old, upholstered chair near the hearth. "Small streams form great rivers. That's why the queen wants the brother."

She wrapped a blanket around her as a chill clutched her core. She tucked her feet under herself and stared at the person she was supposed to befriend.

"Poor thing," Dianttha muttered, deciding that the face on the pillow was rather sweet after all.

BEFORE THE SUN ROSE, the storm became gentle rain with soft breezes. Dianttha pulled back the moldy curtains over the small window, opened it, and sniffed, but the motion disturbed dust on the curtains and the sill, and she sneezed.

"Bless you," Arika said with a yawn.

Dianttha jumped and spun around. Arika's eyelids fluttered as she pushed her arm out from under the blankets and rolled to her side. Dianttha laughed at herself until the sound of feet met her ears. Twirling back to the window, she watched the people of the tiny village emerge from the three long houses and look to the road.

The older ones shook their heads and went back inside, pulling the youngest children with them. Two men and a woman who looked to be about her age pulled off their tunics, changed into their Wolf forms, and ran.

Her shoulders fell as she whispered, “You won’t get far.”

Arika let out a sigh that sounded like a dove’s coo. Dianttha ensured the princess was sleeping and rushed to pull on her stockings and boots, all toasty warm despite worn heels and knots. There was no sound from the other side of the door. Carefully, she pulled it open, then froze. Outside, wrapped in an old blanket, was the girl—Lala—who’d fetched and carried for the queen since they arrived last night.

Lala jumped to her feet with the same silly, trusting smile she’d worn last night. “Yes, my lady?”

Dianttha put her finger to her lips and looked back over her shoulder to check Arika hadn’t awakened, then motioned for Lala to enter. She rushed in, her eyes wide and eager. Her lips pressed closed, she stared at the sleeping princess.

Dianttha whispered, “Relieving myself. Stay here. Let no one except the queen or Lady Uflora in. Make no noise.”

Lala nodded so forcefully Dianttha was surprised her neck didn’t break, then sat on the floor in front of the hearth, still staring at the princess. Dianttha slipped out, ensuring the door didn’t squeak as she closed it. Tiptoeing down the stairs, she went through a small side door.

Morning sun and fresh air filled her lungs. She stood still only long enough to taste the new day, then jogged between the broken stones of the road between the houses. As she reached the edge of the town, the first of the High Guard crested the hill on horseback. Their captain dismounted and approached her.

“Daughter,” Captain Maël said, opening his arms.

Dianttha wrapped her arms around her father’s neck, breathing in the oil from his sword and his oaky soap, but before she could say anything, he pushed her away, keeping his warm hands on her

arms and stroking them like he did when she was young. Only his eyes, tired yet restless, reminded her that they were not safe.

"You shouldn't meet me out here. Not like this," he scolded, but his eyes smiled at her.

"I had to see you," she said. "The princess is here, but I haven't heard about where the prince is."

Captain Maël shook his head. "You know more than me, then. Is she well?"

Dianttha nodded, but scanned the windows of the casino to make sure the queen wasn't watching them. "I'm worried. Will you be recruiting?"

"A Wolf unit ran ahead of us." He looked around him. "Is this the entire village?"

Dianttha looked at the faces in the windows around them and whispered, "They're all Wolves. They hardly—" She stepped away from him as Lady Uflora's white face appeared at the window over the casino door. Raising her voice, Dianttha continued, "It's a shame. I so hoped you'd have found the prince by now. You'll find stables on the other side of the casino."

Captain Maël half bowed to his daughter and whispered, "Be her friend, daughter." Louder, he added, "I'll send word if I hear any news."

Dianttha jogged away from him to the casino door.

"BUT WE CAN'T GO!"

Arika threw her arms up and knocked over the table holding a pitcher. Lala dove to grab it, spilling water over the front of her dirty tunic, but Arika didn't notice. Dianttha nodded her approval to Lala, but waited for the queen to speak.

The queen rolled her shoulders back and narrowed her eyes, but her smile widened. Finally, she laughed. "Oh, my dear girl. This is why I already love you so much." She glided across the room and

wrapped her arm around Arika's shoulders. "You're so concerned about everyone but yourself. Lady Uflora, isn't she precious?"

Lady Uflora nodded, but Dianttha knew that smile. Those pale lips lifting into that little curve, those cheeks flushing with only the slightest of pinks, meant she wasn't happy. Dianttha had seen it directed at those she was about to discipline too many times.

Dianttha lowered her head. Lady Gobo always laughed and said Lady Uflora looked like a mosquito bite when she was angry: incredibly annoying, but no great threat to those who knew better.

The queen hugged Arika. "Everyone who can be spared is out looking for your brother. But now we must ensure your safety. I won't let any Goblins take you away from me now that I finally have you home where you belong. Dianttha, is the princess well enough to travel?"

"Yes, my lady."

"But—" began Arika.

The queen pulled a pouch from her pocket. From it, she lifted a thin, gold chain with a tiny, round medallion dangling from it. "I bet you thought I'd forgotten my promise."

Laughing, she undid the chain and put it around Arika's neck, and her green skin faded to a healthy tan color.

"It's…amazing," she said. "How does it work? Is this permanent?"

The queen put a finger to Arika's lips. "We all have our little vanities, don't we? As long as the disk is on your skin, this is what you are. Soon, you'll learn all about Mother and how to sing along with her."

She turned and left before Arika could ask more questions, and Lady Uflora followed, saying, "Dianttha, dress the princess properly."

Dianttha curtsied. When she turned back to Arika, she found her trying to blot the water on Lala's tunic.

"I'm so sorry, Lala," Arika said. "I'm such a worm sometimes."

"Oh, no, it's alright. You're very tired," she answered, forcing

her smile to remain even as panic blushed across her cheeks. “Please don’t bother. It’s an old tunic.”

Arika pulled a dress from a neatly packed bundle and handed it to Lala. “They’ve brought me far too many, and you’re thinner than me, but about the same height. I’m sure it’ll fit. Can you help, Dianttha?”

LaLa’s face paled. Her hands shook as shook her head so hard, Dianttha was sure the girls spine would snap.

“I’d be delighted to help.” Dianttha took the dress from Arika and held it up. “But, not this one. Let’s see.” She pulled out a simple brown dress. “A traveling dress. This will do nicely since it’s meant for comfort on the road, not for display.”

“Why did you bring so many dresses when you said we’re only a day or two away from the High Meadow?” Arika watched as Lala, still shaking, let Dianttha pull her soggy tunic off and held the dress open for her to slip into.

“There,” said Dianttha, smiling. “You’d need stockings if you were in the High Meadow, but no one here will mind bare legs.”

Arika held up one dress and then another, staring at them with disgust. “And why so much of this?” She held up a velvet dress with fur lining the neck and cuffs with one hand and cringed. “Is this real fur? That’s disgusting!”

“One reason we’ve been looking forward to your return,” Dianttha answered, “is that something’s wrong with Mother’s Heart. Her song’s irregular. The day you arrived, the cold bit through me as I flew here. Today, it’s warm—almost hot. You and your brother will restore the balance.”

“Ugh, you sound like Aunt Diviva!” Turning to Lala, Arika smiled. “That looks good on you, Lala.”

Lala whispered her gratitude, but her eyes were wide as she stared at her reflection in the mirror. Her hands followed the seams and folds of the dress.

Arika turned back to Dianttha. “Can you say anything original or only what Aunt Diviva tells you?”

Lady Uflora entered the room, saving Dianttha from answering. “You’re not dressed yet? We must get underway, Dianttha.” She stopped speaking and stared at Lala. “What—?”

“It looks good on her, doesn’t it? You brought too many for just me, Lady Uflora,” Arika said. “And I’m ready to go.”

Lala said nothing, but stared at the floor.

Lady Uflora hummed and then said, “Come with me, girl.”

Dianttha’s heart skipped a beat and her bottom lip quivered as dread fell over her. She glared at Arika, who stuffed the dresses she'd pulled out back into the bag. “Please, princess, you’re not dressed, and packing is not a chore for you.”

Dianttha snatched the fur-lined dress from Arika, folding it as neatly as she could.

“What’s wrong with this?” Arika demanded, holding out her arms and spinning around.

“It’s only a tunic,” said Dianttha. “You need a dress that befits—”

“Oh, please.” Arika sighed and sat on the bed attempting to fold one of the dresses. “I thought the school uniform was bad enough. Do I have to wear these?”

“They’re lovely,” started Dianttha.

“Do I get to fly on a broom to the High Meadow?” Arika jumped up and rushed to the window, pulling away the curtains.

“You’ll need to learn how first. For now, we’ll travel by carriage.” Dianttha resisted the urge to look outside, afraid of what was in store for Lala.

Arika’s shoulders slumped. “I never thought I’d miss the town car. Look, there’s Lala. She’s coming back, and she looks very happy.”

“What’s a town car?” Dianttha closed her eyes and focused her breathing as she held up a green dress with little ornamentation. “How’s this? There’s no fur on it.”

“Fine,” Arkia grumbled as she pulled off her tunic, leaving her naked. “Give it to me.”

Dianttha held out the dress for Arika as the door opened and Lala dashed in, smiling and laughing. “I’m to go with you, princess!”

Arika squealed, jumping up and down. It was all Dianttha could do to keep her in the dress as she took Lala’s hands in her own. “That’s wonderful! My first friend here is staying with me.”

Dianttha smiled despite the braided chain on LaLa’s neck with the shiny black stone.

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CHAPTER 4
FRIENDS AND ALLIES: LAS VEGAS

ISABELLA

Too loud. Lying on the bed, Isabella tried to push herself up to her elbows, but it hurt too much.

Marcus's voice drifted over the nice, cool hum of the air conditioner. "You awake?"

Sunlight from the open door burned her eyelids. "Ow," she whispered.

"Sorry," Marcus said, closing the door. "Any change?"

Marcus smelled good: clean sweat, heat from the desert sun, and young, strong blood. His heartbeats, consistent and healthy, filled her ears. She swung her feet over the edge of the bed.

"Nothing. Give," she said, reaching out with one hand while the other hand pushed her to her feet.

Marcus handed her a bucket of ice. "Let me help."

Isabella forced a smile. "No. You're too tempting."

"Oh," muttered Marcus.

Isabella thrust her hand into the bucket, but her skin still burned. Most of her skin burned, but what remained of her hand still felt as if hot coals were wrapped around it. She didn't like to think about what the flesh falling away from her bones looked like. She'd kept her hand wrapped in a towel and her body wrapped in a

bedsheet, so Marcus couldn't see the worst of the burns, but his sudden whistle told her he probably had. She wanted to sleep, but Marcus needed her.

Marcus moved the chair closer. "Issy, do you have any money on you?"

She lay down again. "I keep falling asleep."

"It's good for you," he said.

She forced herself to sit. The curtains were closed, but diluted sunlight filled the room. She twisted to keep her body out of the light. The stench of mold within the bed nauseated her, and the smell of burning flesh coming from her own body made it worse. The television was on. A local car salesman screamed about the great deals to be had with no credit check.

She tried to smile, but it hurt to move even that much. "My jacket."

Marcus handed it to her, but it fell to her lap.

"Whose blood is on it?"

"Phin's, I think. He was bleeding from the crash, but so was I."

She sniffed. "Mostly his: it stinks. You're not bleeding now. That's good." She drooped where she sat. "Always keep cash for a dash. I learned that back in the old days, but the rule still applies."

Marcus wasn't wearing a shirt. His flesh was sweaty, and the sweet smell of his skin mixed with the dessert air. She turned her face into the cold breeze blowing from the air conditioner. It felt good, and pushed his scent away from her.

"It's not working, Marcus. Blood won't fix me."

Marcus kneeled in front of her. "I know, but if you need a little blood—"

"No." Isabella imagined his lovely, bare chest expanding and contracting. She put her good hand on it, letting its warmth tickle her fingers. "Appreciate the offer, but I need too much. We hang out here till dark. Then I'll get some."

Marcus kept his voice low and calm as he placed his hand over hers. "You know we can't wait that long, Issy. If nothing else, Frank

will freak out if we don't get back to the Cave soon. And who knows what Cesar will do."

Isabella tried to smile. "Too bad I can't call Jonesy. He owes me a favor or two."

"I've had enough of magic, thanks," said Marcus. "I'm going to the casino across the street. I'll call Frank from there."

He stood, and Isabella grabbed his arm to pull herself to standing. She swayed, but he caught her before she fell. "No, Issy. You can't go outside. The sun's out."

She pressed her good hand into his arm to hold herself steady. "You're not going alone. I promised Frank I'd take care of you."

Marcus taped a sheet of laminated paper on a table next to the phone. "This place has a laundry room."

"Good," Isabella said, pulling her jacket on. "You need a shirt. I need a hat."

Isabella let Marcus wrap an arm around her to stay between her and the sun bouncing off the asphalt of the courtyard as they made their way to the elevator. A car pulled into the motel's parking lot. Under the smell of the sun beating against the asphalt and the jacket burning her skin, she smelled a bad carbonator, cigarette smoke, and Werewolves. Car doors opened.

"We're here?" a woman asked with a yawn.

"Damn," said another woman. "That's a long drive."

"Let's go," said a man, his voice, rough and commanding. "I'm getting some gambling in before we go to work. Check us in, Bull, then meet us at the casino."

Bull's voice was just as rough as the first man's, but it reminded Isabella of something or someone.

Marcus hit the call button on the elevator again and again until it arrived. Pushing Isabella inside, he muttered, "There's only two floors, jeez. How long does this thing take?"

Isabella had only a moment's relief from the sun before the doors opened to the outdoor courtyard and more sunshine. Marcus pushed her through a short hall, and then into the laundry room.

Isabella felt sunlight streaming into the room, but it didn't touch her. Marcus helped her sit next to a wall of vending machines, all humming in the heat of the room. Washing machines and dryers rumbled. She smelled someone nearby, then heard a snore. Marcus had settled her next to the sleeping woman who smelled of alcohol and sex.

Marcus whispered, "No one else is in here. I'm going to check the dryers."

Isabella reached over and bit the woman's neck. She didn't stir. When Isabella sat back, she didn't feel any better. Marcus fumbled through a basket of clothes at a folding table, mumbling as he folded underwear, shorts, socks, and shirts. Another woman walked in; Isabella kept her head down and listened. Marcus's heartbeat didn't change, and his breathing remained tempered.

"I bet he's smiling," she whispered to the sleeping woman who didn't hear her. "He has a lovely smile."

The woman closed a washing machine door and tapped buttons. It started, and she walked out without saying anything.

Marcus stopped folding and whispered, "Not much to choose from, but it's black and the right size."

"But?" Isabella asked, picturing Marcus standing in front of her.

"Across the chest it says, *Midnight in Vegas* beneath very red, glittering, puckered lips," he said. "The only socks I could find are bright green."

Isabella tried to smile, but wasn't sure if Marcus was trying to make her laugh or if he was truly concerned about his found attire. "You always look good, kid. I hear the girls always take longer to order when you're working the counter of your shop."

The smell of his blush made her smile widen until it hurt. He helped her stand as he set a bucket hat on her head.

"Sorry it's so ugly," he whispered, "but it'll cover the top of your face."

Isabella nodded. "It'll work. Leave some cash. We're not thieves."

“All you’ve got is hundreds,” Marcus said, pulling Isabella’s money from his pocket.

“Focus,” Isabella said before poking him in the ribs, but then regretting it when the action hurt her finger.

Marcus placed a hundred-dollar bill beneath a folded bra. His stomach growled, and he grinned. “Let’s go.”

ISABELLA’S NOSTRILS flared as Marcus pushed her into the casino and the smell of tobacco, people, and money filled her nose. Heavy metal music blared, slot machines dinged, and people talked too loud. All the noise assaulted her ears and echoed in her brain.

Marcus sniffed. “I forget what it’s like being in a room filled with cigarette smoke.”

Isabella wanted to laugh, but her throat hurt too much. “You should try it with my nose.”

Marcus pushed her toward a burger place inside the casino. “Let me get you a place to sit that’s at least a little out of the way. Then I’ll look for a vendor selling phones.”

“Get yourself something to eat,” Isabella said.

A masculine, gruff voice shouted, “Craps!”

Isabella dropped her head to huddle as close to Marcus as she could get and whispered, “Werewolves: that’s one of the voices I heard at the motel.”

Marcus body twisted away from her, but she pulled him back to her.

“Don’t—they’ll see you looking. Assuming, of course, that they haven’t smelled me yet.” She pulled him closer. “I can’t protect you. I got no strength.”

Marcus patted her shoulder with the hand on his arm around her shoulders and he delicately pulled her into a hug with his other arm. “That’s okay, baby, I’m tired, too. I’ll just play a couple of hands. Let me get you something to eat.” To someone Isabella

couldn't see, he added, "Okay to sit anywhere?" He moved her forward, keeping his body against hers as he whispered, "I recognize the one in charge."

Isabella tried to open her eyes, then remembered neither of them would see much. "How?"

"Coffee?" Marcus asked someone walking past them as they sat on bar stools. "And any chance for eggs and toast?"

"Whatever you want, kid." A man tapped in the order on his POS. "You old enough to be here? And your friend—?"

"Dead tired," answered Marcus. "She did the driving."

Isabella nodded as the man walked away. "You're good, kid. Now, how do you know the Wolf?"

"Wanted poster I saw when at the police station. A face that ugly, you don't forget. Remember the really ugly Werewolf who got Phin? I bet that's his twin. They both had wanted posters."

Someone set two cups in front of them and poured some coffee.

"Thanks," Marcus said. Quieter, he added, "I know how we're getting help."

Before Isabella could ask, Marcus popped a piece of bacon in his mouth and walked away.

The eggs congealed in front of her; they stank of stale grease. Somewhere, shutters opened.

"What time is it?" she asked a man walking by.

"Five after nine," he said. "More coffee?"

Isabella's cup was cold, but Marcus's was empty. "Thanks."

More shutters slid open, and packages shifted as Marcus's voice drifted to her from somewhere nearby. "You open?"

He was buying something. She'd forgotten how early the sun rose in Vegas. She propped her chin on her good hand and jumped as a hand caressed her shoulder.

"Issy?" Marcus whispered.

"I'm awake," she said, sitting up.

Marcus placed dark shades on her face. "These will help. We need to go back to the motel."

Isabella shook her head. “You go on. I’ll get a room here.”

“No,” Marcus said, tapping a number into the phone he’d just bought.

Isabella reached out to take the phone from him, but he was too fast.

“Captain Happy,” Marcus said as a deep voice with the slightest of accents answered on the other end of the call. “It’s Marcus LeBrere, Frank’s nephew; we met yesterday. You’re going to think this is really weird, but you know how I was looking at those wanted posters yesterday? Well, one of those ugly twins is here playing craps. Sorry, here at the Grand. Is Uncle Frank with you? I wanted to let him know I’m not trying to capture any criminals.” He forced a laugh, then hung up and put his hand on Isabella’s shoulder. “There’s one more thing to do. Wait here.”

He shoved the last piece of bacon into his mouth and crunched it as he walked away.

Isabella shrugged. “I’m not going anywhere.”

In an instant, Marcus was at her side, pulling her up. “Gotta go.”

“What?” Isabella asked.

“I just told the ugly guy—Upton or Upwood, not sure which he is—that the barman recognized him and called the cops.”

They stopped, and Marcus pushed her behind what had to be a sales stall. Doors opened, sending a shaft of sunlight to Isabella’s toes as Upton or Upwood voice said, “Call my brother.”

“They’re heading for the motel. Hoped they’d move faster.” He moved her outside the door, but then stopped and hugged her close in the shade of the awning as police sirens raced toward them. “We need a Goblin, Issy. We need your friend Jonesy.”

What?” Isabella shouted. “I can’t see what’s happening, Marcus.”

“Cops got here too fast,” he said. “They’ve pinned the Wolves in the motel parking lot, and SWAT’s turning the corner.”

“Call Frank. We’ll have to risk—” Isabella stopped as a familiar scent drifted to her.

A deep, rumbling voice said, “I don’t know what you have

planned, but you better do it before the Werewolves know you stand here watching their imminent capture."

"Who are you?" asked Marcus.

"Jonesy?" Isabella reached her hand out, and a strong, cold hand took hers.

"Your young friend called me," said the old, familiar voice rolling like smooth boulders tumbling down a hill. "He should not have been able to do that. Isabella, you are gravely injured."

Isabella slumped; her legs would no longer hold her up. Marcus grabbed her before she fell.

"Help a girl out, Jonesy," she said. "For old time's sake?"

"For you," Jonesy said, squeezing her hand. A wave of warmth washed through her and up her arm, then into her core. As good as it felt, it also made her sleepier than she already was. "And you, young man. Your talents are…" He paused and chuckled. "We have much to discuss. Now, show me where to go."

"What?" asked Marcus.

"Quickly—show me where to go."

Blackness enveloped Isabella like a favorite blanket wrapping around her, and she entered what she assumed was her final sleep.

Frank

After a shower and a power nap, Frank made his way back down to the Cave, hoping to see Marcus before he and Isabella left, but they were already gone.

"Issy wanted to get the feel of the roads," said Ramon. "Cesar's awake."

He pointed toward the steel door of Cesar's office. Cesar leaned against the doorframe with his hands in his pockets, watching the men and women at the stills, at the desks, and those passing through.

"You look better," Frank said, nodding at the hints of color in Cesar's face and avoiding thinking about how he got the color back

in his cheeks. Cesar's eyes, however, startled him. Their dark, hickory, and yet transparent color had returned. Cesar almost looked like Cesar.

"Feeling better," Cesar said with a smile. "Ramon says you found bodies—Wolf victims?"

Frank followed Cesar into his office, returning to the plush leather chair he'd sat in before. "More than one, but there's something else I didn't have time to share with Ramon." He stopped and chuckled. "I thought Issy's driving was bad. Must be a vamp thing." He handed Cesar his phone with the photo of the Wolf's head painting . "Mean anything to you?"

Cesar studied the photo. "Standard, 'Beware of Wolf' sign. Send it to me."

Frank tapped his phone and when he looked up, the photo was displayed on the monitor behind the desk. "Thought as much. Eugene painted something like it on the door to that little computer room she works out of at CC's. Luna told me about it."

"Luna's a good kid," said Cesar. "This is Upton's Wolf."

"Upton?" asked Frank.

Cesar waved his hands, or maybe he typed unseen keys. The picture of an incredibly ugly man with long, stringy, blond hair and a broken nose appeared on the monitor. Upton stood half way inside the doorway of the High Meadow Casino, but looking back as though someone called to him.

"Works for Mrs. Smith, but he doesn't wear a collar."

Frank leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. "How long ago was this taken?"

"Within the last week. He's wanted by law enforcement, so he doesn't show himself unless he has to. He's got a real criminal record—nothing we made up—and he keeps close to the casino and Mrs. Smith, but he's in charge of the Werewolves in Las Vegas now." Cesar tapped and other pictures of Upton appeared on the screen, but they were always taken at a distance, and he rarely looked at the camera. "I've had Wayne gathering intel over the last

few months."

"Even his Wolf is ugly. I recognize him now from the wanted posters at the police station. Has a twin, Upwood. You trust Wayne to get you good information?"

Cesar shrugged. "As much as I can, but not as much as you."

Frank's stomach rumbled. He sat up and glanced at the open door behind him. "Mutual. Isabella says she's the best driver around here. Trust her?"

Cesar opened his mouth to say something, closed it, squinted, and finally said, "Head upstairs to the Speakeasy. Food's good. Ask for Shirley; she manages the place. And try not to worry about Marcus. Isabella always does what she says she's going to do."

Frank stared at Cesar, scratching his chin. "Or she'll answer to you?"

Cesar nodded. "Only when you're done with her. Go, eat. When I hear something, I'll find you."

DESPITE THERE BEING no windows in the Cave, Frank knew the sun was up. He paced and worried. Even Cesar worried from his desk as he listened to police scanners and sent messages to contacts.

"What time is it?" he asked Shirley.

Leaning back in the chair in front of the opening to the tunnel that led to the exit, she didn't look up from her book. "Two minutes since the last time you asked."

"Right," said Frank, nodding.

He returned to pacing in front of the enormous stills and the wall lined with cots, where vampires and humans snoozed and recovered from donating blood, across the front row of desks, and then back to the entrance tunnel. Voices in the Cave were especially quiet with anticipation, worry, and perhaps fear. Frank wasn't sure. The hissing from the stills, the fans of the computers, and the tapping of shoes walking on the smooth, concrete floor echoed

loudly around him.

He didn't know if Shirley stationed herself at the tunnel entrance to stop him from leaving to search for Marcus, or if Cesar put her there to keep an eye on him. Whenever he approached her and asked the time, she didn't look up, but when he was on the opposite side of the Cave, he caught her looking behind her in the tunnel.

When he approached her again, he didn't ask the time. "Thanks for dinner last night and for breakfast this morning, even if I didn't eat it."

Shirley looked up at her with pretty, clear, purple eyes and smiled, showing her sharp, white teeth. "Glad you liked it. I had a hell of time finding the kind of chef I could work with."

Frank stared behind her and into the dark tunnel with its tiny, almost nonexistent lights running along the ground toward the elevator to the surface.

"He's okay, Frank." Shirley stood and ran her cool hand along his shoulders, then sat him in her chair and massaged his neck. "I know this is hard, but Mrs. Smith isn't interested in Marcus. The Wolves won't bother with him."

Frank sighed as Shirley's cool fingers pushed and soothed his tight muscles. "Thanks. I know all that, but he's my nephew. I have to worry. I'm worried for Phin and Issy, too. They're all good kids."

Shirley uttered a soft, teasing laugh. "Issy's older than me. And from what I hear, Phin can take care of himself. They'll be fine."

Frank patted her hand as he turned and saw her bright, round eyes staring into the darkness. There were no comforting words he could say that he would believe, but he was spared from saying anything when Ramon showed up at his side.

"Your phone's ringing," he said.

It vibrated and the screen flashed bright blue. Before it reached his ear, he said, "Marcus?"

"Your nephew's an ass, but I like him," Happy said over a siren.

"What's he done?"

"He called me saying he's just seen one of the twins from the

wanted posters. I didn't believe him, but called my contact on the Grand's security team, who confirmed it," he replied. "On our way now."

"The Grand?" Frank asked, looking for Ramon, but he'd dashed to Cesar's office as soon as he heard where Marcus was.

"Yeah, and he asked me to let you know he'd made the call but wasn't about to try and catch him," Happy said. "What was that about?"

Cesar was out of his office, followed by Ramon as Frank said, "Tell you later."

Frank ended the call, and as he put his phone back in his pocket, a blue light—at first, only a fuzzy speck—grew brighter and larger in front of him.

"Watch out!"

"Take cover!"

"Out of my way!" Cesar growled, but Frank didn't see him.

The light blinded him for only a moment, and then it was gone. Marcus stood in front of him, his knees buckling. Frank reached for him, but Shirley got to him first and slowed his fall. Frank dropped to his knees in front of Marcus when something or someone roared like a boulder breaking off from a mountainside.

"Peace!"

Frank twisted to look up. Next to him stood the largest man he'd ever seen, but it wasn't a man. Two legs carried a torso as long as he was tall, and two thick arms held up in surrender despite a bundle. The creature wore the loudest blue suit he'd ever seen; the vest under the jacket glittered gold, and was smeared with what looked like blood. A bright red jewel held an equally loud blue tie in place. A fedora, glittering with blue and gold, dropped off the figure's head, revealing a face with a large, bulbous nose pierced by too many gold rings to count and eyes like giant emerald bowls. Fur or hair covered its head, but what struck Frank was what it carried like a baby in its blue arms.

Vampires surrounded them ready to pounce. Shirley crouched

and growled even as Marcus reached for Frank and panted, “He’s a friend.”

“Stand back,” Frank shouted to the vampires.

“He’s saving us,” croaked the figure in the creature’s arms.

Frank cringed, recognizing Isabella’s voice and what remained of her face.

“Who are you?” boomed Cesar’s voice through the silence in the Cave.

Marcus, still huffing to catch his breath, said, “This is Jonesy. He can save Issy.”

Frank watched Cesar’s expression soften even as his eyes narrowed. “What do you need?”

“Blood and space,” Jonesy said with a voice that reminded Frank of a boulder rolling downhill.

“Follow me,” said Cesar.

Shirley helped Frank lift Marcus to his feet. Frank held him back from following Jonesy when Marcus bent over still panting.

“Maybe I’ll catch my breath first.”

“Come on,” Shirley said. “Let’s take him upstairs.”

Frank shook his head. "Cot."

As soon as Marcus lay down, he was asleep. Frank’s knees weakened, and Shirley quickly put a chair behind him. She remained with him, gliding her hand along his back.

“He’s fine. Just needs to sleep. Everything’s fine now.”

MARCUS WOKE, leaping to his feet and knocking over the tray next to the bed.

“Where?” he asked before plopping back down on the cot holding his hand to his head. Frank grabbed him and held his arms until Marcus nodded. “I’m alright.”

Frank picked up a pitcher from the tray at the other end of the bed and poured him some juice. “Drink this. It’ll make you feel

better."

Marcus clasped the cup with both hands, but waves formed on the liquid from his shaking. Frank put a hand over Marcus's until the ripples subsided and he could drink.

"Just take it easy. Jonesy said you'd be shaky after your trip."

Frank removed his hand, and Marcus drank the whole cup. "Trip?" he asked. His voice sounded as if his throat were lined with sandpaper.

Frank shrugged. "Don't ask me: something to do with magic. You scared the hell out of me and the vamps when you appeared like that." He took the cup and poured more juice. "This is the good stuff Cesar used to serve at his club in Austin. Drink more. You look, uh, peaked."

Marcus smiled. "Peaked? Isn't that kind of old-fashioned, even for you?"

Frank laughed, holding the cup until Marcus had a firm grip on it. Shaking his head, he said, "I'm a hell of a lot younger than Issy."

"How is she?" His voice was stronger, but still sounded like he had a mouth full of sand.

"She'll survive," said Frank. "I don't know how, but Cesar says Jonesy saved her. Oh," he leaned forward to whisper, "don't be alone with any of the vamps for a while. They've all given a little— you know— to speed her recovery."

"You know they can hear you when you whisper, right?" Marcus answered, jerking his chin to a vamp on the ladder over the stills who had stopped tapping on his tablet to laugh and look at them.

"Yeah, right," said Frank. "Actually, everybody gave a little, but it seems they were prepared and had a good store of blood. I didn't ask where it came from, but apparently they needed some fresh stuff, too. They didn't want mine."

"Too old and stale," Marcus snickered.

The vampire on the ladder laughed out loud, and Frank shrugged. "Whatever. Feel like eating something? Jonesy says you need to build your strength."

AS SOON AS Marcus could stand without feeling dizzy, Frank led him along a dimly lit hallway with only three doors; two of them had keypads next to the doorframes, but Frank stopped at the door with a window on it and no keypad. As he opened it, the lights on the ceiling brightened. Vending machines lining the far wall lit up with a loud hum.

Frank jumped, almost backing into Marcus with his hand on his chest. “Holy shh—crap! Jonesy, what are you doing sitting here in the dark?”

“You said to remain here,” replied Jonesy.

He sat hunched over a table in the center of the room. The single light above the table made his blue skin glow as though he were an alien from a 1960’s movie. As he spoke, the scales along the bridge of his nose twitched. His ears, which looked like thick needles poking out of a head that was bald except for a few tufts of fur or hair popping out of skin folds and a pale, pointed hat that flopped to the side, twitched. Frank shook his head, seeing his reflection in Jonesy’s deep emerald, almost black, eyes.

Marcus walked around Frank and slid into a chair next to Jonesy. “You okay?”

“I am not okay,” Jonesy snarled. “I risk everything to save you and your friend, and this human thanks me by shutting me up in this room.”

Franks snorted. “You wanted to be alone to think. You also said you were hungry.”

Marcus rolled his eyes. “Frank, Jonesy could have turned us over to the Werewolves or Mrs. Smith, but he didn’t.”

Jonesy’s lower lip jutted out as his top lip pulled back, revealing long, yellow, pointed teeth. He tilted his head so far to the side that his ear touched his shoulder. He stood, pulled his shoulders back, and his face changed. Frank’s jaw dropped as Jonesy’s form glowed multiple shades of blue before returning to that of an ordinary, but

still very large, man.

Marcus grinned. “That’s so cool.”

Jonesy’s very human face turned to him. “This is the face you met this morning. How did you know me by my true face?”

Marcus shrugged. “You were blue when we got here.”

Jonesy folded his arms across his chest. “You fainted and did not see me.”

“I didn’t faint.”

Frank nodded. “Yes, you did.”

Even Jonesy’s voice had changed; it was the same deep, gruff voice from earlier, but now it held an earthy tone, like giant stones rubbing together under the floor, but it was almost human. “You traveled the lines woven by Mother’s Song while under considerable distress. It is not something humans do without years of training and practice.”

He stroked his chin. Marcus opened his mouth but closed it and shrugged in answer.

“You still haven’t told me why you’re helping us when you work for Mrs. Smith,” Frank said, pouring cups of coffee for Marcus and himself. “And how did you find this place?”

Jonesy pursed his lips as Frank sat across from him and pointed at Marcus. “He told me where to come.”

Marcus shook his head. “You just put your hand on my shoulder, and asked me where to go. I didn’t tell you where to go.”

Jonsey shook his head. “I asked where we needed to go. Your mind connected with mine and showed me. It’s not supposed to work that way.”

Frank cleared his throat. “Regardless of how you found this place, how can we trust you not to tell your employer where we are?”

Jonsey gripped the edge of the table and almost growled. Coffee splashed out of Marcus’s cup. “She is not my employer.” He looked away from them, his shoulders tightening before they slumped. He donned the odd, blue face with the pointed ears and bulbous nose

again. “I’ve worked with her for so long, I did not see how much she despised me. I wanted to learn, but she never taught me what I needed most.”

Frank grumbled, “Good story, but for all I know, you did that spell that nearly killed my nephew.”

“Let’s hear him out, Frank,” Marcus whispered. Turning back to Jonesy, he said, “You’re home’s another world, where CC and Eugene are, isn’t it? Phin called it the Wildes.”

Jonesy nodded. “Yes. To end the wrongs here, things must be set right there.”

“And Phineas?” asked Marcus.

Jonesy shook his head. “Mrs. Smith will not kill him; she wants him to control the others. She wants Eugene, too, yet Teaser and I protected her. I am sorry I could not protect her brother.”

“Damn,” Frank said, staring at nothing on the back wall. “What will she do to him?”

Jonesy sniffed. “She will compel him to do what she wishes.”

“What’s she planning?” asked Frank.

“Destruction, the likes of which even she does not comprehend.”

Frank stood. “Let’s go upstairs. Marcus needs to eat and there’s no point talking about all of this now when we’ll have to repeat it for Cesar. He and Marcus both seem to trust you, so I will.” He put his hand on the door handle, but stopped and looked back at Jonesy. “You might want to go back to the human look.”

Jonesy stood and bowed his head. When he looked up again, it was with his human face.

“That’s so cool,” Marcus muttered before gulping down the last of his coffee.

“Not the word I’d use,” Frank said, moving to stand between Jonesy and the door. “What’s keeping you traveling the song or whatever out of here and reporting to Mrs. Smith?”

“Spells,” Jonesy said as though the answer was obvious. “Shadows bend and twist, protecting this place. I do not know this magic; it is not for those who walk in the sun.”

Frank and Marcus both stared at him.

Jonesy sighed. “The shadows moved for him, thus allowing me to arrive. I cannot leave until someone moves them out of my way.”

Frank shrugged. “Still don’t get it. Don’t think I want to.”

“I do,” whispered Marcus.”

FRANK GRINNED as Shirley first placed a small, black napkin in front of him and then a glass filled with clear liquid. He sniffed, then sipped. “Good stuff.”

She grinned. “Thanks. Been wanting to try my hand at making my own for a while.”

Frank swallowed another sip of the sweet liquid and closed his eyes. Warmth traveled down into his chest and settled in his stomach. The jazz group reached the chorus; the bass thumped as the guitar raced through minor chords and the singer’s voice jumped up an octave. The noise of the tourists was a low hum. He took another sip that soothed his nerves and the tension in his head relaxed.

Since arriving in Vegas, he’d largely conquered his fear of vampires, learned about new worlds and new peoples, and discovered he liked working with them all. Witches were real. Goblins were real. Well, he knew Goblins existed before arriving. Cobalt lived in CC’s attic, and her house was where Luna worked and sometimes slept, but he’d never met him. He allowed the facts of the past twenty-four hours to align. Witches or a Witch attacked a casino sending CC and Eugene to another world. In that attack, Witches or a Witch almost killed Cesar, who was hiding something about that attack and how he escaped. Witches or a Witch attacked Luna in Austin, but she was supposedly safe because of Cobalt’s presence. Witches or a Witch almost killed Isabella. Witches or a Witch might have destroyed Marcus, too, if he hadn’t had the good sense to contact the Goblin, Jonesy. But how had he known how to

contact Jonesy, and why was Jonesy lying about him doing it?

A familiar grumble reminded Frank of Jonesy's presence. He drained the rest of the moonshine from his glass and turned to stare at him. "I haven't forgotten about you."

"Is it safe for you to be up here?" asked Marcus.

Jonesy waved to the waitress. "Humans see what they expect to see."

Frank focused on Jonesy's face. Dark eyes twinkled beneath thick, gray and brown eyebrows and a mop of dark brown hair dangling over his forehead

"Except for you," Jonesy said, staring at Marcus with the same intensity which Marcus stared at him."You see my true face."

"Why?" Marcus asked.

Jonesy scratched chin. "I do not know, but maybe…"

Frank slammed his glass on the table. "Maybe what?"

"Frank!" Marcus muttered, waving at the tables filled with patrons.

Jonesy shook his head. "Someone should question me. Someone needs to doubt my motives. I've lived a lie for so long I do not know what is true anymore."

Jonesy's eyes narrowed and he leaned close to Marcus. He sniffed and sat back. "You are sensitive to Mother's Songs. If you weren't, we'd never have arrived here safely."

Frank watched Marcus's eyes, which were still fixed on Jonesy's face, widen. His lips pressed into a thin line before loosening back to the small smile he often wore when he didn't want anyone to know what he was thinking, but Frank knew he was taking everything in, organizing the facts, and coming to his own conclusions.

Jonesy scratched the back of his neck, causing one of his long, pointed ears to shake. "You're touched."

"By what?" Marcus and Frank asked at the same time.

Shirley signaled a waitress, who returned to the table with fresh glasses for everyone. Frank looked at Shirley to refuse, but she shot

him a wide, toothy smile complete with fangs.

“Boss says to keep your glasses full.” She winked at Marcus, whose cheeks flushed.

“Any chance I could get something to eat and maybe some juice?” asked Marcus.

The waitress nodded to Shirley and walked away.

“You’re a terrible liar,” Frank told Jonesy with a snort.

“It is what my friend tells me. That is why I left the casino when I did. Had Mrs. Smith asked me if I’d interfered with her plans, I could not have hidden the truth from her. I am a Goblin, and Goblins do not lie.” Jonesy lifted his glass, toasted Frank, and then drank it down in one gulp. “To speaking the truth with friends.”

Marcus lifted his own glass to his lips, tasted the moonshine, then set it back down shaking his head. He pushed the glass away.

“I want to do what is right and correct, but there are many complications,” said Jonesy.

Frank gulped the moonshine and slammed the glass down on the table. “Bull shit. You do what’s right or you get the hell out of the way.”

Jonesy’s back straightened even as he leaned forward, fixing his gaze on Frank’s face. The waitress reappeared with more glasses and a plate of meatballs smothered in red sauce and cheese. She placed the plate in front of Marcus and left.

“Bull shit?” Jonesy asked as he gulped down another drink. “I often hear that expression among humans. I find little purpose for excrement other than to nourish and replenish the soil.”

Frank drank another glass. “You either do the right thing, or you don’t. If you can’t because you’re physically unable to, you get help.”

The waitress returned to the table, this time setting a full bottle of moonshine in the center of it. Frank poured, and Jonesy drank.

“Nothing worth doing is as simple as that,” said Jonesy.

“Right is right. Sure,” Frank lifted his hand to stop Marcus from interrupting, “I understand gray areas, but from what I can see, a

war is brewing. You have to take the side you can fight for with a clean conscience."

Jonesy poured, and Frank drank. "What if there's another way that doesn't call for war?"

Frank poured, and Jonesy drank. "No one wants to kill. Well, maybe some folks do, to survive, but they don't really want to… except for maybe a few psychos out there. But hell, no one wants blood on their hands." He leaned on the table as he poured another glass. "Blood never washes away."

Marcus stared at them as he ate. The waitress returned with a plate of sliders, still sizzling, and set it in the center of the table. He continued to eat, listen, and watch until he noticed Shirley shiver and look down as though to hide her eyes.

Jonesy drank another glass. "No, blood is like lies. As soon as you think you've conquered one, it comes back stronger. There are reminders of lies everywhere."

Frank drank another glass, then filled his and Jonesy's. They both drank.

Shirley leaned down to whisper in Marcus's ear, "This is too depressing."

Marcus looked around. Tourists were drinking, eating, talking, laughing. He stood and shook his head at Frank. "You're so right, but—"

Shirley shook her head. "Go on. We'll look after them."

Marcus wrapped a slider in a napkin. "I hear you're working on your hospitality degree."

Shirley's face lit up with a smile. "Nine hours to go. Finished my practical hours in June."

They moved through the crowd to the kitchen so Shirley could give Marcus a tour.

FRANK PUSHED up from the table. Jonesy sat slumped in his chair

across from him, his head lolling back and his mouth hanging open. Frank poured the last of the moonshine into the two empty glasses in front of him.

"Jonesy." He coughed, clearing his throat. "Wake up."

Jonesy shook himself and rubbed the drool away from his mouth with the back of his hand. "I'm awake." Lifting the full glass in front of him, he said, "Living sucks."

"Amen," Frank replied before emptying his own glass in one gulp. A full bottle of moonshine sat on the table. The only light in the room came from the small electric candle in the center of their table, an exit light behind the stage, and a line of tiny LEDs along the floor near the bar. Frank peered into the shadows. "I hate it when you guys do that, but thanks. Jonesy, everybody's left for the night."

Jonesy opened the full bottle and filled their two glasses. "Everybody leaves."

Frank drained his glass. "And when they do, it's my own damn fault."

"No one to blame but myself," Jonesy said, lifting his glass. "We are what we are."

"I don't get you, Jonesy." Frank filled his glass, but held it in his hand as he stared through it at the Goblin. "You say you don't want to…" Frank waved his glass around him while he thought of the words he wanted to say. "You don't want to help this old Witch that has all the Vamps running scared, but you're working for her. And what's with that silly hat?"

Jonesy emptied his glass and pulled the floppy, pointed hat off his head. Glitter sprinkled off it and onto the table. "I earned this hat…years it took." He placed it back on his massive head and sighed. "You've got it easy, Frank."

"Ha!" Frank sipped from his glass. "I'm on wife number five—the best of the lot—and here I am. I've brought her only nephew into a war that has nothing to do with either of us. If anything happens to him, she'll leave skid marks on me. And you want to

know the worst part?"

Jonsey drank before answering. "You like him."

Frank drained his glass and nodded. "I like him. He and his sister are the closest I've ever come to having kids. They're good people. Had a rough time of it—growing up. Can't let anything bad happen to 'em."

"Bah! You're all nothing but a bunch of kids—even you. Back when I was young, I came to this world, and…" Jonesy waved his arm, indicating everything around him. "Nothing but a dusty road and stinking cows. Cows really stink."

"Yes, they do," muttered Frank. "Just how old are you, Jonesy?"

"In your years?" He shrugged with a grunt. "Mrs. Smith offered sanctuary and learning, but she tricked me then, and she lies to me still."

Frank belched before pouring his next glass. "Then we ought to teach her to tell the truth and do what's right."

Jonsey raised his glass. "And keep your kids safe." He drank. "And my kids."

"Your kids?"

"Uh…wards. That's the right word." Jonesy filled their glasses. "A condition of working with Mrs. Smith— keep the kids safe."

"Whose kids? How old are they?"

Jonesy sniffed as a tear rolled down his scaly cheek. "They're not yet fifteen in this world. They don't even know what they are. Their dad. Their mom.The best of us all: noble, peaceful. Gone."

Frank sniffed and handed Jonesy his handkerchief. "That's tough. Kids need their folks. I'll help you get them back." He pushed himself up from the table. "Where?"

"Wildes."

Frank dropped back into his chair. "Huh?"

Jonesy laughed and grinned so wide, Frank had to rub his eyes to make sure he was seeing what he thought he was. "She thought we were too stupid to see what she was doing."

Frank laughed with him. "What'cha do?"

Jonesy leaned forward. “Sent them all away: Eugene, CC, the kids. Got ‘em away.”

Frank slammed his hand on the table. “Alone?”

“Teaser’s with them.”

“Teaser?”

“Good man.”

“Sure?”

“Goblin: very good-looking.”

Frank laughed, filling their glasses before raising his in a toast. “To good-looking Goblins. You’re sure not one of ‘em.”

Jonesy laughed with Frank. “To humans: good-looking ones and you.”

“To friends safe at home. May they stay safe.”

“To friends,” said Jonesy, “even those we cannot help.”

They laughed and drank until they fell asleep again.

CESAR WAS CLOSE. Isabella felt his presence, steady and secure like an ancient stone pillar, was distinguishable from all other vamps. It’s one of the things about him that terrified her, but right now, it comforted her as if he’d wrapped his cold, stone strength around her. Every fiber of her ached, twisted, and burned hotter and hotter until flames burst from her skin.

“The sun!” she shouted, sitting up and putting her hands over her face.

“It’s nighttime,” Cesar said, his voice so cool, so calming, so commanding. It was the voice he used to seduce the pretty coeds and handsome athletes in his old club. It reached her through the pain until it wasn’t there anymore. “You’re safe.”

Isabella opened her eyes to find she was in a bed so soft and warm she had no choice but to close her eyes until cold gripped her core and seeped into her bones. The salty, warm aroma of blood drifted into her nose. A hand lifted her head as another wrapped

long, thick fingers around her hand as her own hand gripped a cup. The cup touched her lips. She drank, and the warmth ran through her, soothing, but fear persisted and twisted like knives.

She opened her eyes. This time she saw the red cloth hanging from the ceiling above her, and shadows dancing above her head as soft, gold and orange lights flickered. Images of Phineas falling and the smile of that slimy, ugly man.

"They got Phin," she said, surprised at how raspy her voice sounded.

"Yes," answered Cesar. "They got him. I'll—"

"Marcus?" Isabella turned her head toward Cesar, causing the skin on her neck and the muscles in her back to screech in pain, but she had to see him and make sure he didn't lie to her. "He saved me."

"Always said there was something about him," he said, staring back with those cold, dark eyes. "He's fully recovered, like nothing ever happened."

Isabella gazed into the eyes she knew so well and saw the truth. "He's one smart kid," she said, closing her eyes until the scent of warm blood and the sound of it pouring into a cup roused her. "Things got sticky, but he kept his head. He kept me alive."

"He is, indeed, a remarkable human," said a familiar voice on the other side of her. It reminded her of old stones in a stream with water running over them, and it sang.

The cup returned to her lips. She drank it all and lay back down, but this time, she didn't drift back to sleep.

"I don't think he's ever been in a proper gunfight." Isabella pushed herself up, but pain shot through her sinews and muscles and bones, and she fell back to the soft, warm bed. Cesar lifted her head, and placed a pillow under it. "What aren't you telling me? What happened to us out there? I thought…I thought I'd walked into the sun."

"You almost did," said the strange, yet familiar voice.

"A light surrounded me. It burned." Isabella lifted her right hand

to her face, barely touching it, and grimaced with effort. “Everything hurts.” She held her hand in front of her face, staring at her white palms and fingers. “Cesar? I—”

Two great blue hands cupped hers. “It was bad, old friend, but you are safe now. You are healing well and at great speed. Marcus comes by every hour to inquire about you.”

“I won’t let him in just yet,” said Cesar.

Isabella strained to hear them, but sleep threatened to wash over her. “Really?” Her eyes fluttered closed again. She bit down on her cheek. “I told Frank I wouldn’t let anything happen to him. Is he mad at me?”

“No, Issy,” said Cesar. “Frank’s not mad at you. Just the opposite. He’s glad you’re safe.”

Isabella waited, but when neither Cesar nor the other said anything, she realized her eyes were closed. Unable to open them again, she asked, “What happened? I’m in the healing room…you’re with me. Ah, jeez! Did I kill someone?”

“No,” Cesar said with that same calm, confidence he always had. “You didn’t kill anyone.”

“Good.” Isabella held up her hands and studied them. Blue and red veins popped and grew around bone and muscle. Nails grew, but too clear, too white, too soft. “Holy Toledo! I’m growing new skin? Never done that before. And I can see. Are both my eyes back?”

Wearing that calm, cold smile that worked so well in business negotiations, Cesar brought another cup of blood to her lips. “Drink. It was bad, Issy, but you’re recovering. Somehow, Marcus contacted Jonesy. The two of them brought you here, and Jonesy had the right kind of magic to stop…to speed up your healing. On your own, it would take weeks, maybe even months. I’ve seen it once before. It took a lot of time and killing. You still need more blood, but we’ve got plenty on tap.” He reached over and brushed a single strand of hair off her brow. “There’s plenty of time for you to heal. Let the blood do its work.”

As if he'd said a magic word, Isabella closed her eyes, but before sleep took her, she said, "Surprised to find you playing nursemaid. Figured you'd have gotten yourself to that other world to get CC by now."

"Cesar is in his office," said the deep, familiar voice. "He cannot join Ms. Carson or Eugene. Why did you assume he would?"

Isabella giggled. "Hey, Jonesy. I thought you were here."

"We take turns playing nursemaid until you are well enough to be on your own." Jonesy smiled down at her and she stared into his enormous emerald orbs for eyes. His long, fuzzy eyebrows scrunched together as he picked up the warm cup from her bedside. "Are there affections between Cesar and Ms. Carson?"

Isabella let a long sigh pass her lips, or maybe she fell asleep. She wasn't sure when she answered. "Of course, but neither will admit it. You'd see it, too, if CC were here."

Jonesy shook his head. "Human affections are most peculiar. Despite all my time here, I still do not understand them."

Isabella watched the face of her old friend before asking, "What's happening, Jonesy? I gotta know."

Jonesy stroked his prominent nose and stared at her. "Frank discovered the Werewolves have been housed in the storm tunnels under the city, but we do not believe the Wolves remain there. With his help, the police located bodies of some lost souls who called the tunnels home."

Isabella reached over, took his hand, and whispered, "Magic."

Jonesy shook his head as he stroked the delicate new skin growing on her hand. "Mrs. Smith deceived me and my dear friend, Teaser, for so long. Had I known she would force the Wolves to kill…" He let out a long sigh. "But good will come from this. I have a new friend in Frank. A wiser human I have not yet met."

Isabella sighed sleepily. "I like Frank, too. He knows how to talk to a girl."

Whether she drifted to sleep for a while or only a moment, she didn't know, but at some point, a voice slipped into her thoughts.

“She is past danger,” Jonesy whispered. “We may leave her.”

Opening her eyes, Isabella watched him shrink back into his human form as Cesar opened the door for him.

“Cesar, I know you miss CC, but she’s a smart cookie…” She wanted to say more, but slumber wine this battle.

“Sleep, Issy,” whispered Cesar. “I’ll wake you in time for the meeting.”

FRANK SWALLOWED the aspirin Shirley offered him with an entire glass of water. She left the pitcher on the table between him and Jonesy, who removed a blue bag from his pocket and poured some of its contents into his glass before stirring it with his finger. With each swirl, the color changed from pale green to bright blue, and finally it fizzled, turned pink, and then glowed a shade of green that reminded Frank of swamp water after a hurricane.

“Headache?” Frank asked.

Jonesy grunted and closed his eyes as the liquid slid down his throat. “You, too, are in some discomfort?”

“Discomfort?” grumbled Frank. “An understatement.”

Jonesy poured some of the blue bag’s contents into Frank’s glass and stirred. “This will help faster than your pills.”

Frank put the glass to his lips, sniffed, and winced. It smelled like swamp water: however, noticing Marcus’s gaze on him, he brought the liquid to his lips and swallowed it in one gulp. Sweetness and calm passed from his mouth to his throat, throughout his chest, and finally to his aching head. The throbbing eased to a dull strum.

They sat in a room outfitted not so much for comfort as for conversation. Plush leather benches formed a horseshoe, and small cocktail tables were placed every three feet. Large monitors filled three of the walls; two of the screens were black, but the one over the center bench opposite the door displayed people cleaning in the

Speakeasy. Soft lights in the ceiling glistened off the gold, intricate tiles and the thin, gold lines in the wallpaper.

Shirley picked up a remote and turned on the other screens. One displayed the other private meeting room, dark and empty, and the other showed the same group of people cleaning the Speakeasy but from a different angle.

"Boss keeps even these little rooms classy. Drinks? Food?"

Jonesy's thick, bushy eyebrows squished together.

Frank said, "A little warning next time about how strong your hootch is."

Marcus smirked, lowering his face and hiding his mouth with his hand.

Before Frank could comment, the door opened, and Cesar walked in with Ramon and Isabella behind him.

Marcus leaped out of his seat. "Issy! You're okay."

Isabella's usually pretty, sharp face didn't smile, but her eyes opened a little wider. Dark circles lined those dull eyes, and her right hand was wrapped in gauze. As Marcus put his hand on Issy's good arm and led her to the seat next to him, the edges of her mouth lifted just enough to be noticeable.

"How are you feeling?" Marcus asked.

Isabella nodded, squeezing his hand. Cesar nodded to Ramon, who closed the door and stood with his back to it as Cesar sat on the center bench.

"She's recovering, but it'll take a while before she's back to normal." Turning to Jonesy, he added, "We all have you to thank. I owe you. Now, tell me about the children."

"What children?" asked Shirley.

"The twins," Jonesy replied, "Mrs. Smith's niece and nephew."

"Actual family or pretend?" asked Cesar.

Jonesy nodded. "Children of her eldest sister. Ricia, the best of all the witches. She was as powerful as she was good, but she and her sisters did not agree on the future of the Wildes, their home and once my home. She wed the offspring of the Aurum, the Goblin

Ringleader of the Inner Circle. A true love match. Together they planned the unification of the Wilderness and gave birth to twins. Their vanquishing nearly destroyed the Wildes. Our only hope for peace now rests with their children."

Frank folded his arms across his chest. "Then why are they here? And how do they figure into getting CC and Eugene back and ending the war between Witches and Vampires here?"

Jonesy waved his hand toward the empty space of the horseshoe. A gold light formed a cloud that stirred round and round until a ball of light, white and dim , throbbed in front of them. "The Heart of Mother is the root of all magic. See how she fades."

Frank squinted as the ball swelled and spun, shrunk and dimmed. He straightened his back and turned to Cesar, who leaned forward, staring into the light with wide eyes.

"We shouldn't be able to look at this," he said so softly Frank thought he might have been speaking to himself.

"Only a facsimile," Jonesy said. "Even so, you should not."

Frank looked at Isabella and Ramon. Isabella's white eyes were fixed on the light, but he couldn't tell if she truly saw it. Her too pale face was made even more so by the light. Ramon and Shirley turned away from it.

"Just as every mother has a heart," Jonesy began, "every world has a Mother. In the Wildes, her heart was strong. It served us well, and we honored her, but something changed. Yours, I fear, has been dim and bleeding for as long as I have walked this earth."

"Magic doesn't really exist here anymore, does it?" asked Marcus.

Jonesy looked at him through the ball of light. His eyes narrowed until they were only pinpricks. He licked his lips and finally shrugged. "The peoples of both worlds use the Heart of their mother, but I'm afraid you do not replenish her as we do. Her song is weak and fading."

Frank turned to ask him why, but Jonesy raised his hand.

"It's too weak to draw upon, to meld with, or to understand—at

least for most humans."

"But you understand enough to draw on it," said Marcus. "Otherwise you couldn't travel along Mother's Song to get us here."

Jonesy smiled and nodded. "We do not take from her; we sing with her. To do anything else would destroy her and us."

"Destroying our…" Marcus shrugged and scratched his chin. "It makes sense. How else could you have sent CC and Eugene to the Wildes? How could Mrs. Smith fake the attack at the casino? I mean, if she can't draw on the Heart of the earth for magic, where's it coming from?"

"Well?" Frank asked, turning to Jonesy.

Jonesy smiled. "Marcus is correct. Witches of the Wildes cannot weave the song of Mother's Heart. Goblins can, but we are made of earth, made near our Mother's Heart, and live close to her. Here, we learned to do the same. Sing her song and replenish what we take, but we cannot fill her Heart as her own children should. Witches weave songs; there are a few here who can do so, but Mrs. Smith draws her power from the Heart of the Wildes."

"She shouldn't be able to, should she?" Cesar waved his hand, and the ball of light disappeared. "Here, we have the advantage, but only because Mother's Heart is dying. We can weave the shadows and survive. Why do the Witches of the Wildes let her pull power away from them?"

Isabella leaned back and shifted her wounded arm. "How did you get me and Marcus to the Cave if you're not using magic made here?"

Jonesy stood and looked down at Marcus. "I did not bring us here. He did."

"No," said Marcus. He turned to face Frank

Isabella's pale, stiff pale face broke into a tiny grin of wonder as she turned her head to Marcus. "That's so dope!"

"I didn't—"

"You did," Jonesy interjected. "I sang the song with Mother, but it was your song that wove with hers to bring us here."

“Magic,” Cesar added with a nod.

Frank stared at Cesar and his business-as-usual face. “You knew he could do this.”

Cesar shook his head. “No. I was told to protect Marcus and Luna.”

“Because,” Marcus chimed in, “Luna’s got the vamp gene or whatever it is.”

“It’s what we all assumed.” Isabella forced a smile as she looked at Cesar, but it was so weary it didn’t last long. “I mean, I assumed. Not many reasons we’d be given order to protect kids.”

Marcus lowered his head to his hands, but said nothing.

Isabella put her hand on his back. “You’re special, Marcus. Face it.”

Marcus lifted his head to look at Frank. “It was supposed to be all about Luna.”

“Those murders,” muttered Frank. He couldn’t look at Marcus; it was still too painful. “The murders of all those foster kids last year: did that put you on to Marcus and Luna? Or was that all CC?”

Cesar wasn’t paying attention to Frank. He kept his gaze fixed on Marcus. “I wasn’t told why I had to protect you and your sister, Marcus, and I don’t know what signs to look for. I’m sorry I wasn’t there when your younger brother died. If I had been, I could have stopped it.”

Marcus stared at Frank. “Am I why he was killed?”

Frank and Cesar answered at the same time. “No.”

Cesar nodded at Frank, who continued. “From what I learned, mostly from CC, even that creature couldn’t tell who was what. He hunted for unhumans hidden in the foster system. He knew to look for fostered and adopted children, but that’s all he knew. He grabbed your brother because he could. Nothing to do with you.”

Marcus nodded, leaned back, and took a deep breath before he smiled down at Isabella, who continued to hold his hand. “I’m okay. This is just a lot to take in. Brings back a lot of memories. Jonesy, we all need to know what’s going on—all the details.”

Jonesy bowed his head. “We will speak more, you and I, about your potential.” Turning back to Cesar, he said, “The High Coven of Witches and the Goblin Inner Ring sent the twins here for their protection. Mrs. Smith was already here, established in this meadow and close to the Heart of your Mother, feeding her with songs of protection required to protect the children. Every month, the High Coven and the Inner Ring connect with Mother, strengthening the songs of protection. The twins also connect with Mother, although they do not understand what they do. It is this connection that Mrs. Smith abuses, but she hides it so well, I did not see it until recently.”

“But,” Cesar said, leaning back and folding his arms, “now you know. Will the others know, too?”

Jonesy nodded. “Perhaps, but I think not. Neither Teaser nor I saw the spells she wove until this attack. Her spells are subtle, but powerful. Once we discovered this, it was too late to stop her on our own. If we who stand beside her did not see it…”

“How do casinos feed power to the Mother or her Heart?” asked Shirley.

Frank turned, surprised to find Shirley sitting next to him. He’d almost forgotten she was in the room. He twisted around to make sure Ramon was still in the room.

“Great joy,” said Jonesy, “feeds all Mothers’ Hearts. In the Wildes, every town and village, no matter how small, has a casino where the people dance, sing, feast, mourn, gamble, and gather. It is part of everyday life. Mrs. Smith pulls that power here.”

“Are the Hearts of both worlds meant to beat together?” Shirley asked.

“No,” said Jonesy. “I believe, as does Teaser, that Mrs. Smith and Queen Diviva, the twins’ other aunt, plot to take control of the Wildes, but neither knows the other’s plan.”

“That’s why she wanted CC dead,” Cesar growled.

They’d worked together on and off for years, but Frank had never heard anger in Cesar’s voice like this. It was quiet,

smoldering, simmering, and deadly.

“That is our theory,” said Jonesy. “We realized the truth too late to prevent the attack.”

“And Eugene?” asked Cesar.

“Pain to my heart,” Jonesy said, beating his fist against his chest. “I did not think Mrs. Smith would harm her, but when I first suspected she was manipulating the Werewolves, I convinced Mrs. Smith to send her to Austin, where Vampires ruled, first your predecessor and now you, Cesar. As she stepped off of your plane—”

“How is she turning the Wolves into slaves?” Isabella asked.

“The collars.” Ramon startled Frank as he moved too quickly to sit next to Marcus.

“Will you stop that?” Frank muttered.

Marcus grinned. “You get used to it.”

“No,” said Cesar, “Humans don’t get used to it. Sorry, Frank. We’ll be more careful.”

“Yes, the collars,” said Jonesy, “the spells they hold, I do not understand. We tried, Teaser and I, to break the spells, but we could not. At this last call for Mother’s aid, Teaser feared more than I what Mrs. Smith might do. He told me she would betray us, and she did. Almost too late, did I lend my aid to Teaser.”

“What actually happened, Jonesy?” asked Cesar.

“She pulled strength from Mother of the Wildes to send the twins home, to the High Coven and her sister, Queen Divia. Through the twins, Mrs. Smith and her sister command Witches and Goblins, but Teaser twisted the spells. While the twins were transported, they did not go where Mrs. Smith wanted them to. I blocked the spell meant to take the life of your friend, CC, and capture Eugene. I sent them both to safety, wrapped in spells of such protection as I could sing in that brief moment. Cesar, I beg your forgiveness. I could do nothing more. As always, I was too late to see, but you are a master of Shadow Magic. You did not need my help.”

Cesar shrugged. “If you say CC is well, and you can get her—both of them—back, I’ll hold no grudge.” Cesar leaned forward. “Now tell me, what can we do here, right now? Mrs. Smith broke the treaty. She knows we won’t let her live in peace. How can we fight the kind of magic that she uses to kill us?”

“Ah,” said Jonesy. He stood, tugged at the lapels of his long coat, and smiled. “She is afraid, Cesar. In her fear is your salvation and mine. Above all, we must break the spell that holds the Werewolves. She’s poured all she knows into it. This, I feel it in my bones: Free them, and all she has done will be undone. But, we must act with haste. With the next rotation of the worlds, alignment between Earth and the Wildes will return, and she may once again pull power from the Heart of the Wildes. When that happens, Mrs. Smith will destroy both worlds in her attempt to gain control of them.”

He waved his hand, and once again, golden smoke filled the center of the horseshoe, but as it swirled into a glowing, pulsing ball of light, six others—some smaller and some larger—formed around Jonesy. A lone, twirling globe glowed green and faint compared to the first globe’s brightness.

“On the twins’ birthday, our worlds align with perfect symmetry. Mrs. Smith will pull the song of the Wildes here, breaking the songs of both.” He pointed to the pale green globe. “Teaser anticipated this, and wove the songs of both Mothers to counter Mrs. Smith’s spell.” As he spoke, a swirl of light jumped from the white globe to the green one with its own swirl of light. Together, the swirls turned gold and green, then wove together until, with a flash, both globes vanished into swirling mists and glittering lights. “The alignment broke faster than Teaser expected.” He raised his hand and the swirling mists vanished. “They will align again in twenty-two nights. At that point, you must break the spells Mrs. Smith uses to hold the Werewolves as slaves. Only then can you enter the center of the High Meadow Casino and reclaim the Heart of Mother, and only then will the Mother of Wildes reclaim

her Heart. Mrs. Smith does not believe you can do this."

"Right," grunted Isabella. "We'll just walk into the casino and ask her to break her spell."

"Maybe," said Cesar.

Frank stared at Cesar, unable to decipher the thoughts going on behind his calm, business as usual expression.

Cesar folded his arms and his expression cracked. He smiled like a man who knows the answers he needs. "We have three advantages over Mrs. Smith. She can't find this place, she thinks I'm dead, and Phin's a pain in the ass until he gets what he wants. A spell might make him obey her, but he won't stop fighting it until he finds his sister."

"And," said Jonesy, "you have Marcus."

"Hang on," Frank interjected, looking from Jonesy to Marcus.

Cesar leaned forward. "Marcus protected Isabella from the spell. He can do it again."

Marcus stood and raised his hands and shook his head. "No, I'm not—"

Jonesy placed a hand on Marcus's shoulder and nodded at Cesar. "If you allow, we shall withdraw and see what Marcus may or may not be able to do before we proceed with our plans."

FRANK FOLLOWED Cesar into the office. As Frank sat, Cesar tapped his phone, and then the screen behind his desk lit up with video footage of a modern building. Adults carrying backpacks walked in and out of it at random intervals.

Frank poured and drank a full glass of water before asking, "The university?"

"University of Nevada Las Vegas library." Cesar sat next to Frank and stared at the screen. "Ramon, what do you see?"

Frank startled in his chair and turned as Ramon closed the door and stepped close to the screen. "I never hear you," he muttered.

Ramon stared at the screen for a moment, and then squinting, pointed to two men without backpacks sitting on a bench near the entrance. “Wolves: I recognize one of them. Where’d you get this?”

“I’ve got people searching for anything online that could be a call for help,” Cesar answered before pointing to the other side of the screen. “There’s Upton.”

Frank leaned forward. “Damn, you have good eyes. Then again, it’d be hard to miss that ugly face. So, what makes this a call for help?”

“Wait for it. A girl in a white shirt. She’s walking out now.”

Frank squinted, but only saw a group of three young women, all in white shirts and pink baseball caps, walking out of the library and laughing. Before he could ask Cesar what he saw, Ramon spoke up.

“I thought Maura was dead.”

Cesar stopped the video. “Wayne thought she was. She missed her last shift, or so he says.” He stood and pointed to the three women. “It might be too hard for your eyes, Frank, but if you look closely, you’ll see that each cap has a name embroidered on the back. They all say ‘Maura’.”

Frank shook his head. “I’ll take your word for it. Is there a time stamp?”

“Three days ago,” said Cesar. “Since then, one or more of these girls has come to the library at the same time each day.”

Frank chuckled. “Someone wants you there. A trap.”

“Upton wouldn’t be there just for Maura,” said Ramon.

Cesar said nothing.

Frank watched Cesar’s eyes narrow, search, and narrow some more. “When do we go?”

“Tonight,” said Cesar.

“You can’t!” shouted Ramon. “You’re too important. Let me do it. I can be in and out without anyone seeing me.”

“Everybody thinks I’m dead, Ramon. If it’s a trap, it’s not for me.”

“Guys,” laughed Frank, unsure whether it was the thrill of a dangerous mission or seeing Ramon contradict Cesar. “I’m the only one who can get in and out without being noticed if the Wolves are still there watching.”

“But you don’t know what to look for,” Cesar. “I appreciate the offer, but if it’s Maura and she feels threatened, she’ll kill anyone she doesn’t know who approaches her.”

Frank nodded. “Point taken. You sure everyone thinks you’re dead?”

Cesar tapped his lips with his finger and smiled. “Ramon, what do you hear?”

Ramon took out his phone and scrolled through messages. “No one’s asked about you. Just a lot of chatter about who can get out of town.” He put his phone down, shaking his head. “Everybody’s too scared of the lights. Wayne’s pinged me twice, but I’m ghosting him.”

“Good,” said Cesar. “We’ll get to them once we know Marcus can provide protection.”

Frank went to the bar and poured himself a glass of juice. “Cesar, in all the years I’ve known you, you’ve always had something set aside for every hook, drive, and ball thrown at you. Hell, this place wouldn’t even be here if you didn’t think there was some off chance that you might need it. You’ve even got a plan to get to your folks here safely.”

Cesar smiled and shrugged. “I might have suspected something was going on.” He motioned for Ramon to sit down. “You’ve heard us talk about Mary Midnight; very old, and very powerful. If you ever see her, go the other way. She’s the one who said Mrs. Smith was breaking the contract and told me to be ready to take control of the city when she did.”

Frank laughed. “So, you built this place. First rule of war: establish a safe harbor for operations.”

Cesar nodded. “Once I took over managing the company, I shuffled funds around, created different companies, and contacted

those who get things done without being noticed and without asking questions."

"I bet not a single vamp was involved," said Frank.

Cesar snorted. "Let me have some secrets, Frank. You're partially right, though. The basic structure is all human. Ramon turned out to be a good resource since he knew Mrs. Smith had limited human contacts."

Frank looked at Ramon, who almost smiled as he said, "Keeping my mouth shut means nobody notices me."

Frank couldn't help but grin. "Except Cesar."

Ramon nodded. "He makes me talk."

Cesar lifted one eyebrow. "That's how I knew what Wayne was up to. He's a good guy, but this is too much for him. He's panicking. If I can't get him here soon, he'll do something stupid and get all his people killed. We have to go on the offensive."

"Step two," said Frank, "secure your assets. How do you propose to shut down the casinos? Vegas is just getting over the COVID thing. Nobody's shutting down without a good reason, one that doesn't involve belief in a war between Vampires, Witches, and Werewolves."

"Don't have to shut it all down," said Cesar. "We just have to make it hard for the old Witch to do business. The Werewolves might have most of the security contracts, but we still control the money. You're right I need to get Wayne and his folks to safety. I'm hoping Marcus can help with that."

Frank nodded. "But back to this video—"

"This video means I can't wait for Jonesy and Marcus to figure out what they're doing. If Maura's in there, I need to get her out. She's not one of Wayne's. She's old, which means she knows things I don't."

"I still say it's too dangerous," Ramon added.

"We just have to make sure neither of you—shit," Frank said. "Shirley's a student there. Could they be waiting for her?"

Ramon shook his head. "No way. She's kept her head down

since she got to Vegas, and most of her classes are online. She only goes out when she has to, and then she's always hidden with runners."

"Humans who know her and know how to spot Wolves," Cesar explained. He stopped talking and stared at Frank. "You're thinking what I'm thinking."

"Let's see if she can help," Frank said, washing out his glass.

ISABELLA SMELLED the blood as Shirley sat next to her with a cup and a straw. "Gosh, thanks, Shirley!"

She took the cup and wrapped her lips around the straw. The blood, warm and sweet, glided down her throat, sending waves of comfort down through her limbs. As she stopped and licked her lips, she realized Marcus was no longer looking at her, and his skin was a shade of green that definitely did not have anything to do with magic.

"Sorry, Marcus, but a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do to get healthy." She winked and wrapped her lips around the straw once again. "Sorry if I was getting a little…vampy on you."

Marcus nodded and mumbled, "Do what you need to."

"You looked like you needed a snack," Shirley said. "How about you, boys? Want anything?"

"Thank you," Jonesy said with a small bow. "I am neither hungry nor thirsty, but I appreciate your concern."

Isabella tightened her lips around the straw to not laugh at Shirley, whose eyes widened as she first nodded her head then shook it, unsure how to respond to Jonesy.

Marcus stopped pacing to look at Jonesy. "I believe you when you say I saved Isabella, but I don't know how I did it. So, how can anyone expect me to save anyone else?"

"You knew the attack was coming because you heard it. Only those in tune with Mother's song hear it and the variations that

arise when another's song mixes with it." Jonesy's blue lips lifted at the corners as his blue scales slid across each other. "It's what you are. You will never again not hear her song."

Marcus sat and bent to put his head between his hands. "You're not listening to me. Nobody is."

"I am listening. You do not want to hear me."

Marcus sat up straight, closed his eyes. He turned his head right, then left.

Jonesy whispered, "You hear the change."

Isabella closed her eyes to listen to the mysterious song. She heard Marcus's heartbeats, the strange, clumping beat of Jonesy's heart—or perhaps hearts, but she still wasn't sure—Shirley's almost imperceptible shift from where she sat nearby, the fans cooling the computers in the Cave, the yeast bubbling in casks, and voices whispering, but no song.

"How?" Marcus asked, opening his eyes.

Isabella looked at him. His angry lips softened to questions. His wide, worried eyes narrowed to seeking.

"The tone changed," Jonesy said with a nod.

"Yes, but how? It's just ringing in my ears left over from the flight. I've had ringing in my ears before." Isabella leaned forward as Marcus's voice softened. "It doesn't mean I'm special. Lots of people hear ringing in their ears."

"Have you not wondered why the High Meadow Casino is located in a high meadow, or that the song is so much louder than it's ever been to you?" Jonesy asked.

"I have," said Isabella. Jonesy looked at her and smiled. She let her cheeks turn to rose, looked down, and sipped more blood from her cup. "Don't mind me."

"You are part of this, Isabella." Jonesy nodded to Shirley. "As are you and I. In the Wildes, our Mother's Heart is centered in a place we call the High Meadow. The High Coven built a great tower there and surrounded it with a casino to hold hundreds in order to channel Mother's power. A city followed. Many live live there now.

They dance and sing to honor and feed Mother. It is the same here."

"Being so close—" Isabella stopped and shrugged.

Marcus finished her thought. "Being so close, I can't help but hear the tones."

"It is her song," Jonesy said, leaning back in his chair. His blue cheeks glowed. Isabella looked at his long, yellow teeth and shivered at the thought of what they could tear apart. "You will learn to sing with her. That is how you will help your world." Jonesy leaned forward and put his hand on Marcus's shoulder. "Even now, she sings to you. What do you hear?"

Isabella leaned closer to Shirley's ear and whispered, "This is so cool."

Shirley glanced at her and smiled. "Not sure if I'm thrilled or terrified."

Marcus put a finger in each ear, closed his eyes, and smiled as if he'd just been given his favorite ice cream. Isabella felt her jaw drop as pale gold and green lights floated around him.

"There's a melody." He opened his eyes and pointed at something in front of him. "I've never seen them so big—the yuccas, I mean. And all the sage."

"What—?" Shirley whispered, but Isabella shook her head and put her finger to her lips.

Marcus turned, looking around, but not seeing the room they all sat in.

Suddenly Marcus lifted both his feet. "Snake!"

Isabella and Shirley both stood, but saw nothing.

Jonesy grabbed Marcus's arms "She is showing you the High Meadow as it was before this city…before any thought of the city existed."

"It's beautiful," Marcus said. "I thought you said you couldn't leave the Cave?"

"We're still in the Cave. Mother is showing you what you need to see right now." Jonesy scratched his chin. "Even through the shadows she calls you to see."

Marcus shook his head. Isabella sighed as the faint, beautiful lights faded from around Marcus as he let out a long, slow exhale.

"You have the gift, Marcus. We may yet save this world, but first we must save the Wildes. We have much to do. We begin by saving our mutual friends from deaths most unpleasant and freeing the Werewolves. Whenever you doubt your abilities, return to the place you just were." Jonesy looked down at Shirley and his face returned to its human form. "Mother may send our young Wizard her song, but we must find a place beyond these shadows if I am to teach him what he must learn. Much depends on what he may or may not do."

Isabella jumped to her feet. "It's not safe out there!"

Shirley added, "You said Mrs. Smith will look for you. If Marcus is seen with you—"

Jonesy lifted his hands and bowed his head. "I know of no other way, and we have so little time. The protections wrapping this place in shadows dull Mother's song. I know nothing of this magic."

"Shadow Magic?" Marcus asked. "Issy, is that what Cesar used to escape the casino?"

"Don't look at me. I didn't know he knew how to twist shadows."

"I thought only the Eldests did that," added Shirley.

Jonesy shook his head. "A very strong vampire provides the spells protecting this place."

"The Duchess," Isabella said with a nod.

"Of course," agreed Shirley.

"I mean Mary Midnight," continued Isabella, seeing the blank looks from both Jonesy and Marcus. "She's my boss…well, just about everybody's boss. She's one of the eldest of all the Eldests."

"Aw. I have heard that name," Jonesy said. "Yes, it could be she. She rules much of the lands surrounding the High Meadow."

"Do I know her?" Marcus asked Isabella.

"I hope not," said Shirley.

Isabella turned toward Cesar's office. "Cesar's probably making plans to get Phin away from Mrs. Smith without me. He'll know a

space you can use." Isabella squinted at Marcus. "You okay? You're a little green."

"It suits him well," Jonesy said with a grin that spread from ear to ear.

FRANK TURNED RIGHT, letting the steering wheel glide through his fingers and enjoying the luxury of a custom steering wheel, the sumptuous curves of the seat as it molded to his tired back and aching knees, and the silence of the electric motor.

"Gliding like butter," he murmured.

"Maura works in the archives." Shirley sat next to him wearing a blond wig and oversize sunglasses. She pulled down the visor and applied scarlet lipstick that matched her UNLV Rebels jersey. "I've met her in the Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf a few times when I've needed to do research. If she's there, she'll come out to meet me."

"We won't have a lot of time," said Ramon.

Frank glanced at where he sat in the back seat with his arms crossed and his lips pursed. Next to him, Cesar leaned back with his eyes closed. "Relax, Ramon."

"You just don't like my driving," Frank snickered, but quickly he looked at Shirley. "Still don't get the getup. Won't the Wolves smell you?"

She flipped the visor back up. "Of course, but the library and its entrance are always crowded this time of day. When I walk in surrounded by humans, they won't notice me until it's too late."

"Why don't they go inside?" Frank asked.

Cesar answered, "Mrs. Smith won't risk a public fight."

"It's not getting in that I'm worried about," said Shirley. "If they've kept Maura in there all this time, they can certainly keep me in there with her."

"Assuming she's there," said Ramon. "This whole thing stinks."

"I agree," Cesar and Frank said at the same time.

“But,” Cesar added, “I won’t risk one of my people being trapped in there.”

“Which is exactly what they’re hoping for—”

“Enough,” Cesar snapped.

A chill ran up Frank’s spine and Shirley visibly cringed.

“She thinks I’m dead,” Cesar said in his normal tone. “I intend for her to keep thinking that for a little while longer.”

“There,” said Shirley, pointing to three coeds in scarlet football jerseys and matching backpacks. They stood in the shade of a building opposite the library’s entrance. “They’re my ticket in.”

Frank thought they looked like sorority sisters, and when Shirley opened the doors and they all squealed and hugged, he knew he was right. “You sure about waiting in the parking garage?”

“They’re not going to look for us there.” Cesar handed Frank a card. “Put this address on the computer. It’s off campus, but close enough."

“And I bet you own it,” Frank added.

Cesar just smiled.

FRANK YAWNED as he stepped away from the table and his stack of books. His phone dinged again with a text from Ramon. Frank shook his head and responded once more.

No contact

A voice on the intercom announced the library was closing. He looked around, but aside from a group of students packing their bags at a nearby table, he didn’t see anyone who looked like they didn’t belong there.

Yawning again, he mumbled, “Getting too old for this.”

“You got that right,” Shirley said from where she suddenly stood next to him.

“Will you stop that?” hissed Frank. “Where’s your friend?”

Shirley wrapped her arm through his and guided him to the door. The same group of women she'd entered the library with stood in front of the exit despite the annoyed glances of the security guard standing outside the door, holding it open and tapping his watch. When Frank and Shirley approached, the young women gathered around them, all talking at once about a party in a dorm.

"She won't leave unless she sees Cesar," Shirley whispered. She stopped, opened her bag, and said, "Damn! I left my phone." She turned and trotted back inside, past the security guard and through a group of students heading to the door, calling over her shoulder, "Go on! I'll catch up."

With a woman on each arm, Frank continued toward the parking lot. As they reached the edge of the road, he caught sight of a kid with bright, bronze hair flying around his face, leaning back on the bench at the bus stop. He would have seemed like an ordinary student were it not for his lack of a backpack and the collar around his neck just visible over the neck of a torn T-shirt. The kid's eyes fixated on Frank, but they were blank, almost unseeing. The boy's nose twitched, and Frank picked up the pace.

After crossing the street, the women on either side of him kissed his cheeks and walked away as if they did this every night.

"Tough job," Ramon said as Frank got into the car.

"Somebody had to do it," Frank said. "Aren't you supposed to stay hidden? There are cameras everywhere here."

"Turned them off," said Cesar. "What's going on?"

Frank drove out of the garage. "Maura's there, but doesn't believe Shirley and I can get her out safely. She wants to see you. I spotted a Wolf…well, a kid with a collar sniffing me as we passed by the bus stop."

Ramon guffawed. "Told you."

Cesar pulled out his phone. "Drive away like we planned, Frank. Plan B."

"Afraid you were going to say that," mumbled Frank. "If I get caught, my wife's going to have kittens."

“READY,” said Ramon.

Frank checked the rearview mirror. Ramon was undoing the last of his long, white braid. He’d taken off his jacket and button-down shirt, and the scarlet jersey made his skin look even paler.

“No one’s going to believe you live in Vegas.”

Ramon shrugged. “Whatever. Cesar, I still don’t like this. I should stay with you.”

Cesar shook his head. “You hung out with Tommy long enough to pass as a student. Besides, the sorority sisters are waiting. Go.”

The light turned green, and Ramon was out of the car before Frank’s foot reached the accelerator.

“You sure, Cesar? When you talked about surviving by using the…or, twisting…whatever you did to survive,” Frank said, “you didn’t sound too sure of yourself.”

“Kind of hoped no one noticed,” Cesar said. “I can do it, but I can’t have your back at the same time.”

“Figured.” Frank patted the gun at his waist. “But not a problem. The spell the old witch uses is designed to hurt you, not me.” A man dashed across the street in front of him. He almost slammed on the brakes, but stopped at the last minute. “Did you see? It was Upton.”

Cesar nodded as he stared out the window. “They’re tired of waiting. They know she’s there. One shot, Frank: that’s all we need to shut down the campus and fill it with cops.” He turned to stare at the reflection of Frank’s face in the rearview mirror. “If you get caught, I’ll explain to Jasmine why you’re in jail.”

Before Frank could answer, Cesar was out of the car and out of sight.

Frank sighed, moving the car forward and burst into a belly filling laugh. “Frank Jarvis, arrested for shooting a gun on a public campus to help save a vampire. Who’d have ever thought it?”

He parked the car across the street from the library after passing Upton and a crew of five walking down the street. His stomach

twisted as he pulled the baseball cap low over his face and walked away from the car. When he got close to the library's entrance, he glanced at the kid he saw earlier and noticed he was leaning against a palm tree near the entrance. Sweat formed on Frank's brow; he pulled out a handkerchief and wiped it away. His stomach twisted, and then he saw Shirley standing in the shadow of the entrance with another woman.

"Come on, Frank," he whispered to himself. "It's not wrong if it's saving lives."

Taking in a deep breath, he removed his gun from its holster, clicked off the safety, and fired once at the top floor of the library. The bullet shattered a window. He hoped Shirley was right about it being an old storage room.

Alarms roared. Someone screamed. More screams followed. Before he could turn to walk back to the car, police sirens blared, growing in volume with each step he took. As Frank reached for the handle of the car, someone grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back.

"Who the fuck are you?" growled Upton, who was much uglier up close than he was from far away or in a photo. "What were you doing shooting at my boy?"

Frank ducked and kicked out as Upton swung at his face. They both missed, but Frank tripped Upton and leaped out of his reach. Running to put the car between them, he shot again, hitting Upton in the shoulder and sending him to the ground.

Suddenly, the kid with the bronze hair was next to Frank, grabbing for the gun. Frank flung his elbow into the kid's chest, but it didn't push him away. The kid growled, baring his teeth as drool dripped from his lips. He lashed out, aiming for Frank's right side. Frank ducked, but not fast enough. A fist boxed his ear, and he dropped to the ground with a grunt. The kid leaped toward him, but then Cesar was there, pulling the kid away by the waist and throwing him.

Cesar moved almost too quickly for Frank to see, but he could

make out his face, and it was devoid of all emotion. His eyes reflected the streetlights and a killer's edge that Frank hoped he never saw directed at him.

The kid stared up at Cesar with blood oozing from his ear and the back of his head. Cesar bent forward to grab the kid's jacket.

"Wait!" Frank got to his feet and ran to the kid, wiping the gun with the edge of his shirt as he went. The kid stared straight ahead, not looking at Cesar or Frank. Frank wasn't sure if the kid saw him or not as he put the gun in his hand. Turning to Cesar, he said, "He's not in control."

Cesar nodded and disappeared into the back seat of the car. When Frank got to the driver's side door, there was no sign of Upton, only a small pool of blood and the black T-shirt he was wearing. Frank jumped in, turned on the car, and sped away, skidding to a halt by the library. He counted to three, then sped away, hoping for swiftness of vampires worked.

"They make it?" he grunted as the car skidded to turn away from the campus.

"They're here." Despite the fast turns and sudden acceleration, Cesar leaned back in his seat, put his hands on his lap, and stared straight ahead. "One more block, then you can slow down."

As Frank slid the car into the traffic inching toward the Strip, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. He looked in the rearview mirror. Cesar still wasn't moving, but something was happening. The face of the killing machine he'd seen earlier wasn't there. The color in his eyes had vanished, or perhaps exploded; all the white was gone. Each was full of an odd, clear darkness. Cesar's lips didn't move, but Frank swore he heard something like a hum coming from him. Cesar's fingers tapped, straightened, and tapped again to a beat Frank didn't hear as his face grew paler and paler.

Frank rubbed his eyes as the bright headlights of a pickup truck passed him. He shook his head, certain those bright lights had flickered off as though giant wings had swooped over them, and then the truck drove on with its lights just as they should be.

Five minutes later, he was on the Strip. Traffic stopped outside the Flamingo. The back door opened and closed. Cesar leaned in close to Frank through his door's window.

"Take your time. She won't try another spell tonight. Ramon will be waiting."

Frank opened his mouth to speak, but at the sight of Cesar's white face and clear eyes, he simply nodded and said, "Be careful."

"Where's he going?" Shirley's voice echoed in the car as they started moving again.

"It was a lot more comfortable back in my closet," another woman mumbled.

"You want to go back?" asked Shirley. "Frank, where's Cesar going?"

Frank cleared his throat. "I think he needed to step out for a, um…bite."

"Gotcha," answered Shirley. "Then the worst is over."

"We've got a while to go, ladies. Just relax."

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CHAPTER 5
FRIENDS AND ALLIES: THE WILDES

EUGENE

Eugene led the way down the mountain and into the forest, scouting the easiest path for CC. Although the sun was rising, the trees were thick, and little light or warmth reached them.

Eugene stopped next to a large boulder, turned, and watched CC hobbling along with Ol'Sassi's great staff.

She didn't try to rush, "I'm coming, I'm coming."

Eugene growled as the sound of CC heavy, crackled breath deepened with each step. When she caught up, CC leaned against the boulder and pulled a chunk of bread out of the basket on her back.

"Want anything?"

"How are we going to fix the magic?"

CC puckered her thin lips and wiped crumbs off her chest. "We have nothing to do with magic, Eugene. I hear water. Are we going in the right direction?"

Eugene jumped up on the boulder and sniffed. "Stream nearby: fresh water. How can we get home if the magic that brought us here is broken?

"Fine," snapped CC. "We'll fix the magic. How do we do it?"

Eugene dropped her butt on the sun-warmed boulder. "Ol'Sassi didn't tell you?"

“Seriously?” CC sighed. “You were with me the whole time. I don’t even understand how I know what you’re saying when all I hear is bark, bark, bark.”

Before Eugene could answer, the hairs on her back lifted and her nose and ears turned towards the water.

CC leaned heavily on the staff. “Easy, mutt. We’ll figure something out. Go check them out.”

Eugene led them on until eventually even CC heard the human voices clearly. “Let’s see if this being-a-hag thing gets us anything to eat.”

Even when the voices began to sing, Eugene remained on guard, but she looked back briefly when CC mumbled, “I’m not a hag.”

Eugene waited for CC to catch up to her. “I got you covered, CC.”

ANOTHER DAY, and they continued on their journey, well rested after hot food and comfortable beds. Eugene continued to search for the easiest paths for CC to hobble along, but each day, CC moved slower and slower.

“Hold your horses. I’m coming,” grumbled CC.

“It’s bad enough you look like someone who sends huntsmen after little girls. Do you have to sound like a wicked stepmother, too?”

CC finally made it up the hill. She opened her mouth, then closed it. After several deep, raspy breaths, she said, “Sorry.”

“Sorry—not!” Eugene huffed and walked the final few feet to the crest of the hill. “We’re never going to get home if you don’t pick up the pace.”

Turning and staring up at CC, Eugene folded her ears close to her head, hung her tail low, and inched close to CC’s feet. “I’m sorry. I keep forgetting you’re spelled to be as old as you look.”

CC pressed her hand against her back and stretched as much as

she could. “I have a whole new respect for my grandmother and her immaculate garden. Did I tell you that she went to Antarctica last year to see penguins? No idea how she keeps it up at her age.”

Eugene jumped up and turned to look down the hill. Below them lay the Westest Road. It curved around the hill, crossed the Yellow River, and disappeared into the thick trees of the Witches Forest. A dozen horses brought people and three wagons to the hill. The man on the lead horse sang loudly and off-key.

“People: humans: merchants, based on Ol’Sassi’s description. We can get a ride.”

CC wiped the sweat off her brow. “Why would they give us a ride?”

Eugene scratched a flea off her ear. “Duh! No one’s going to refuse a hag’s request on the road.”

CC scratched Eugene’s ear with her sharp, crooked fingers. “Hag! I will not use such a degrading term. I’m surprised to hear you use it.”

Eugene couldn’t help but stretch her neck as CC’s fingers scratched the spot her own claws couldn’t reach. “Whatever. You look the part, and you heard the woodsmen the other day. ‘Yes Grandmother. Let me help you, Grandmother. What else can I do for you, Grandmother. Isn’t it grand you’re going to the High Meadow for the Alignment, Grandmother?' Geez! Be the hag, CC. It means a lot less walking."

CC harrumphed and pushed forward. “Let’s just get down there.”

Eugene ran down the hill, letting the warm, wild grasses tickle her belly. At the edge of the road, she leaped into a puddle with a splash. Stepping out of it, she shook, letting the coolness of the water and the air ease her itching, and then she sat and watched CC pick her way down the hill one step at a time.

“We need this , and you know it,” Eugene said when CC finally reached the road after walking around the puddle.

CC sniffed. “Did you have to jump in the puddle? You smell like wet dog.”

”I am a wet dog. Sit on that stump over there and hold out your palm like Ol‘Sassie said.”

CC limped to the stump and plopped down on it. “Oh, that’s better. We may need this ride, but I won’t be called a hag.”

The singing man drew closer, and CC held out her palm.

Eugene paced back and forth across the road, her tail wagging faster as the group approached. “You know this weather is all wrong. We arrived in the Wildes in the middle of a blizzard and now it’s hotter than summer. What do you make of it?”

“Be careful, Eugene,” CC said. “Not sure how we’re going to mix with the people in this world. And for all we know, this is normal for the Wildes. Ol’Sassie said the magic broke the weather. The woodsmen said practically the same thing. We don’t know how broken it is.”

Eugene laid her muzzle on CC’s lap. “We’ll get through this. We’ll fix the magic, save the Werewolves, get my tattoos back, and go home.” She turned her head, sniffed, and barked. “It’s mostly men, but there’s at least one woman…two—no, three. They’re about to turn the corner.” She trotted a few feet away from CC. “Everyone loves an ugly mutt.”

CC muttered, “This is so degrading.”

Eugene growled. “Be the hag, CC.”

Eugene barked and stood in front of CC as the caravan rounded the curve of the hill. The singing man stopped as a companion on horseback pointed at CC. Eugene barked at him as he rode toward them.

The man laughed. “Which is the older hag?”

Eugene growled.

“Quiet, mutt,” CC said.

Eugene couldn’t help raising an eyebrow at CC.

“Traveling,” CC croaked.

“So are we,” replied the man on the horse. “Silks and trims for the wealthy in the High Meadow Casino. Where do you wonder?”

CC spat. “High Meadow: resting now.”

“Resting? I didn’t think hags needed much rest. They're always moving here and there.” He laughed as both CC and Eugene snarled. “But, I’m in need of luck. Two nights in a row, my watchers have spied bandits in the woods: wild Wolves, they say. Come with us. There’s space in the last wagon for a little thing like you.”

Eugene barked at him.

“And your mutt, if that’s yours,” he added. “If you bring me luck, you can travel all the way. I’m Lucrid, merchant of Wannot, at your service.”

Lucrid turned to his companions and shouted. “Cannon, you said I’d have no luck on this trip, but I’ve got it now! Clear a spot for our grandmother and her mutt in the last wagon.”

Lucrid, nudged his horse forward and resumed his song.

EUGENE WALKED NEXT TO CANNON, who walked next to his horse while snacking on cold chicken from last night’s dinner. She stared at the short leg he pulled out of his pocket as his hand lifted it to his mouth.

Cannon laughed. “Hungry, mutt?”

Eugene kept her eyes fixed on the short leg.

“Go ahead then,” he said and tossed the leg just above her head. “Enjoy.”

Eugene bounced up to catch the leg. She stopped walking, ate it whole, then trotted back to Cannon’s side.

Cannon wiped his fingers on his dusty coat. “No more, mutt.”

Eugene stared at the pocket of Cannon’s cloak.

Cannon turned the pocket inside-out. “See? You’ll have to beg for dinner from someone else.”

Eugene barked once and trotted to the rear wagon, where CC sat with her legs dangling off the end.

“Never did much like the idea of farming,” Ebon, the driver of the supply cart, was saying. “Glad uncle took me on.”

“Begging?” CC muttered to Eugene, shaking her head.

“You’re the one who keeps telling me to be a mutt.” Eugene liked her lips. “This guy seem okay.”

CC replied to Ebon. “Good life on the road?”

“Oh, yes, Grandmother,” Ebon said with a laugh. “Always something new to see. My mums didn’t want me to come, but with ten other mouths to feed, she was glad enough to see the back of me, especially now that the weather’s broke. Crops don’t know whether to grow or not.”

“Good son,” CC said.

“Seriously?” huffed Eugene. “That’s the best thing you can say to the poor boy? He obviously misses his family.”

“Miss your mums, son?” CC asked, grinning at Eugene.

“As much as a boy should, I suppose,” said Ebon. “But I like the open road.”

“Good son.”

“Whatever.” said Eugene. “None of them have any idea I understand them. From what I can make out, Lucrid owes protection money to a group of bandits. He told them to piss off, and they’ve been following since, but not since we showed up. The crew is sure you’ve brought them luck.”

CC harrumphed and adjusted the tattered cloak around her shoulders. “Just call me good luck hag.”

“That you are, Grandmother,” said Ebon.

Eugene stopped and turned to face the road behind them. “Horses,” she said, although Ebon only heard bark.

“I don’t hear anything,” CC whispered as she shielded her eyes with her hand. “Get Cannon or Lucrid back here.”

Eugene ran to the front of the caravan and barked until Cannon shouted, “Shut it, you old mutt!”

However, Lucrid turned his horse around. “Something I need to know about?”

When he reached the last cart, he jumped off his horse. “What’s all this barking about, Grandmother?”

CC lifted one shaky hand and pointed to the road. “Horses.”

Lucrid raised his voice and waved to Cannon. “Stop the caravan: Wolf Guard.”

As the horses huffed and slowed , he added, “It’s about time we saw some patrols.”

The right side of CC’s singular, bushy eyebrow rose. “Wagon.”

Eugene pouted. “But this is my chance—“

“Up!” growled CC.

Eugene snarled, but the fur on her back lowered as she leaped up on the back of the wagon, hanging her head low before lying down next to CC.

CC lifted her hand, scratched her ears, and whispered, “I know.”

Lucrid laughed. “Good call, Grandmother. Wolf Guards don’t always like dogs.”

CC grunted, and Eugene snarled. “Maybe we can hitch up with them. They move fast.”

CC pulled her hood over her face as the sound of feet jogging along the road and horses trotting grew louder. The dust cloud they created mixed with the gathering dusk, turning the air around them blood-red.

“Lanterns!” Cannon shouted as he walked along the caravan with a light stone.

Eugene smelled the chicken fat on his coat, the day's sweat on his skin, and a tinge of fear. His eyes narrowed as he watched the dust cloud grow larger, and he rested his hand on the hilt of his sword. Lucrid still smiled, and his eyes danced like they always did, but he drew his shoulders back and stood a little taller. His hand rested on his belt, just above the dagger hidden in the folds of his coat.

Eugene nibbled her paws. “They expect trouble.”

CC nodded and rested her hand on Eugene’s back as two horsemen galloped ahead of the soldiers until they stood in front of Lucrid and Cannon.

“Well met, friends,” Lucrid exclaimed with a florid bow. “I’m

Lucrid of Wannot, merchant of fine silks and trims. You are a sight long looked for, Captain. We've heard sounds in the woods at night. I'll sleep well tonight knowing you're in the area."

A broad man with a thick beard stepped off his horse. Eugene smelled Wolf close him, but he was no Wolf. Somewhere near was a Wolf almost as strong as Phineas. At the thought of him, she sighed and rested her muzzle on her paws, and the man's dark eyes caught hers. If CC's hand hadn't been on her back, she would have growled. Instead, Eugene remained still until the man's eyes shifted to study CC, who also didn't move. He shuddered before speaking to Lucrid.

"Captain Swill, First Core, Wolf Guard. My number two, Lieutenant Owen. We're after a group of rogues." He stroked his beard examining the wagons of the caravan. "Where are you headed?"

"The High Meadow, of course. My goods are fit for the fine folks of the High Coven. Would you care to inspect the cargo?" Lucrid offered.

Eugene couldn't help but smile. His cheerful disposition hid the slyness with which he motioned to one of his crew to hide what was under his seat.

Captain Swill shook his head. "There's a hostel another mile up the road."

"That's where I'd hoped to stay tonight. The road here is easy… or, it was when last I traveled here," Lucrid said with a chuckle. "It won't be a problem for us unless Mother is singing potholes and broken paths."

"We'll ride with you to keep you safe." The captain signaled the other horseman, who rode back to the approaching soldiers.

"Excellent. Will you and Owen ride with me?" Lucrid lifted himself to his horse.

Swill looked at CC. "Where are you headed, hag?"

Eugene lifted her head and pushed her muzzle into CC's hand. "He's afraid of you."

“Come. Go,” CC said, “What’s it matter to Wolves?”

Swill looked back at his soldiers and signaled them. Half a dozen broke ranks, changed into Wolves, and ran into the woods on either side of the caravan. He pulled his shoulders back and lifted himself up on his horse.

“Makes no difference to me.”

Eugene sat up and leaned into CC as the wagon lurched forward.

“Careful, mutt,” whispered CC.

Eugene poked her muzzle over the railing to watch Swill and his lieutenant ride past them to the front of the caravan. She could no longer see the Wolves running in the forest, but she heard their calls, the rush of wind through their fur, and the crunch of grass under their paws. Lying down next to CC, she watched the soldiers march behind their officers.

“Men and Wolves,” she said.

CC adjusted her hood, but kept it low over her face. “Interesting. What else?”

“Swill’s human. Did you notice that not all the Wolves wore collars like the ones we saw in Vegas?

CC nodded. “Yeah, but I was afraid to look too close.”

Eugene felt a lump in her throat and lay her head on CC’s lap. “This is so wrong. I should be running with them.”

“I know, mutt.” CC bent her head close to Eugene’s. “We need to be careful. Don’t let anyone think you're anything but a mutt.”

Eugene sat up, barked, and jumped off the wagon. “I know, but we need more information. I’ll be close if you need me.

CC whispered, “Remember: be the mutt.”

Eugene wagged her tail as she ran under the wagon. “I’ll be the mutt that bites them all in the ass.”

“What’s that, Grandmother?” asked Ebon.

“Stupid mutt,” CC said with a laugh. “Always in the way.”

AT THE HOSTEL, the hearth was warm, and the scraps were plentiful, but Eugene only pretended to be the old, lazy mutt. Cannon and Ebon continually handed her scraps under the table. She ate them, wagged her tail, and then wove under tables and feet that stank of mud, sweat, and shit.

“A rogue pack,” Swill said.

Eugene stretched her neck and twisted to lie on her side as her ears focused on the next table, where Swill sat with Lucrid and the hostel keeper, Tom.

“From the Wild Lands, I hear,” said Lucrid.

“From over the plains,” mumbled Tom.

"Not likely. The Witches keep the borders closed. They’d know if they were crossed." The hesitation in Swill’s voice spoke louder than his words. “We’ll catch them up soon enough and get them under control.”

Tom said, “When I was young, Wolves kept to the rules. Didn’t have none of this running ‘bout, making trouble.”

Lucrid finished his ale. “Was anything really like it used to be?” He laughed and slapped Tom’s back. “Even when I was young, Tom was an old man filled with long tails. Look out; he’ll worry you to death if you let him ramble. Canon, check the stock. I’m off to bed.”

Lucrid stumbled as he maneuvered his legs out from under the table and nearly tripped over the bench, but before he righted himself, he winked at Eugene, then stepped in front of CC where she sat alone near the warming stones in the center of the room.

“Don’t you go wandering, Grandmother,” he said as he stretched. “I need more luck tomorrow. I’ll make it worth your while if you stick with me all the way to the High Meadow.”

CC harrumphed for an answer and took another sip from her mug.

Eugene stuck her head out from under the table and sneezed.

Cannon handed her a bite of cheese, but didn’t look at her. “Stay close, mutt. These Wolves don’t like you much.”

Eugene yawned as she watched Lucrid walk to the back room,

where his caravan crew and the other humans were already lying on cots arranged in neat rows along the far, curved wall and around the columns, each with their own warming stones.

Without looking at Eugene, CC nodded, and Eugene followed Lucrid.

Most of the humans filled the room with snores and sleepy mutterings. Lucrid leaned against the back wall next to an open window. The curtains fluttered in the breeze, letting in a trace of fresh air. He looked out before turning to smile at Eugene. She backed out of the room and slunk under tables until she found the small room adjacent to the front door, through which she'd seen Wolf Soldiers go.

Moonlight filtered in through one narrow window. It was the only room in the hostel with right angles and no pillar or warming stones. Among the dozen sleeping figures within, she saw at least three of the gleaming, enslaving stones on collars. She sniffed. Most were feigning sleep. There were no cots in this room; they slept on the stone floor, wrapped in blankets or cloaks or each other. She looked back to CC sitting still and quiet, eating and drinking what people gave her, and most people in the room brought her food and wine. She gave no indication that she was watching her. Eugene sighed, letting her head and tail droop. She wanted to curl up with the Wolves, to run with them under the moon, to hunt with them, to be part of them.

She shook off the sudden loneliness and was about to walk away when a Wolf soldier rolled to her side. Dark eyes peered into hers as someone outside reached under the closed curtain and tapped the wall so softly, Eugene almost missed it.

Bart, the caravan worker who always scratched Eugene's back at the perfect spot, stood outside the window. Eugene recognized his scent at once as the breeze carried it in. Along with it came the smell of roasted meat, cheese, and apples. A Wolf soldier lifted his hand and took the bundle before another hand passed coins to Bart. The woman watching Eugene closed her eyes as Bart walked away.

Soon the sound of chewing, smacking lips, and satisfied sighs reached her ears.

Eugene wove her way through feet and legs, fewer than there had been earlier. Without looking up, she pushed the hem of CC's tattered skirt and cloak aside with her muzzle, then curled up on CC's thin shoes.

"Why do they need to buy food? They're soldiers. Swill should feed them."

CC brought her mug to her lips. "Controlling access to food. Standard procedure in establishing dominance."

Eugene sighed. "This is so wrong."

CC lifted her head and eyed Swill. "Careful: he suspects we're not what we seem."

"Sleep well tonight, old Tom. No one's going to bother your hostel while I'm here." Swill turned his gaze to CC and Eugene. "Keep that mutt out of my way, hag."

Eugene poked her head out from under CC's cloak to retort, but stopped and laughed so hard she choked and coughed.

CC replied in her creaky, old voice, "Doesn't like you much, either, does she?"

Swill snarled and opened the front door. At that moment, a long howl erupted from outside, followed by more: some answering, some challenging. Eugene pushed herself to her feet and out from under CC's skirts, her ears erect and her hackles high.

"Mutt," CC warned.

Eugene first sat, then lay down, but remained focused on the howls and the calls of the soldiers. The rogues were near.

Lucrid appeared next to CC as Swill barked orders and soldiers ran out of the hostel. The merchants still sitting in the main room called to their companions.

"Our horses!" shouted the fat man sitting with Tom. He motioned to two sleepy boys running out of the sleeping chamber. "Quick! To the stables!"

Cannon slapped the back of Ebon's head. "Get up, you lump! Go

out there and keep the horses quiet."

"You said we'd be safe," another merchant called to Swill.

Swill only grunted in response as he marched out the door. Eugene sat and stood, sat and stood, then looked at CC, but CC didn't move.

Bart stepped out of the sleeping chamber and handed Lucrid a small pouch. "Should I help Ebon?"

"Good idea, but I'm sure the horses are fine," Lucrid said. He looked down at Eugene. "Too far away to be a threat, but as long as I'm to get no sleep, Tom, how about another mug?"

Tom stood at the front door, looking out the peephole. When he turned to look at Lucrid, his knees were shaking as much as his voice.

"They're not coming in here," Lucrid said, pulling a chair up next to CC's. "Anyone can hear they're moving away. Come on now, hot mugs for us all: my treat. And don't forget my old gran' here. She's my good luck."

The merchants and their crews, not out in the stables applauded, and Eugene's fur relaxed on her back as she curled up under CC's stool, letting the melting tension in the room ease her own.

Quiet descended, and nerves calmed despite the shouts of soldiers, the running feet, the nervous stomping of the horses, the barks of dogs, and the howls of Wolves. Minute by minute, all of those sounds moved further away from the hostel. Eugene closed her eyes, but kept her ears trained on the calls of the Wolves. If she were with them, she'd test to see how fast Swill reacted, too.These rogues were good.

She yawned, ready to nap, when Lucrid's voice trickled down to her, distinct from the other hushed voices in the room. Eugene opened one eye to find his head tilted close to CC's.

"A common trick with rogues; call out and see who comes running. Before the night's over, they'll know how many soldiers are about, and any free Wolves around will know how to find them," he explained. Will you keep a pouch for me, Grandmother?"

Lucrid pulled a small package wrapped in cloth and string from his belt and held it out to CC. Eugene sniffed: cold, time, and rot wafted through her sinus cavities. She looked up at CC and growled. “Stinks! Beware of gifts."

Lucrid grinned at Eugene, then turned back to CC. “I’m hiring you to hang on to this and not let anybody know you have it. Sooner or later, Swill will search the wagons. I’ve got a few things he’ll have to confiscate, but these are worth too much to risk.”

Eugene put her paws on CC’s lap and put her muzzle close to her ear. “Don’t trust him.”

Lucrid laughed so hard some of the other merchants stopped talking to look at him. “You two are a pair. Well, mutt. You going to let your friend do this for me?”

CC scratched Eugene’s head and muttered so only Lucrid could hear her, “All the way to the High Meadow? Meals, too, for both of us?”

“Deal.” He slid the package into CC’s hand, then stood and drank the rest of his tankard as Bart and Ebon came in from the stables. Loudly, he added, “Don’t leave me waiting in the morning, Grandmother. I need my luck, but I’ll leave on time with or without you.”

He sat at the table with Cannon as Ebon and Bart joined them.

Eugene lay her head on CC’s lap. "This is so humiliating.”

CC laughed. “I’m the one scratching my best friend’s ears.”

Eugene wagged her tail. “And you just got the right spot.”

“I’D KILL to walk around for a bit,” CC muttered.

Eugene trotted just under the wagon, where CC’s feet swung along with the rattles and bumps of the wagon. “That Swill guy and his soldiers are still behind us, and I’m pretty sure that rogue pack’s close, too.” Eugene turned her head to the right, sniffing the breeze. “Good hunters, but I get the occasional whiff of them on the wind.”

“Best you ride in here with me, Grandmother,” Ebon said without looking at CC.

CC put her nose in the air and sniffed. “I smell the soldiers.”

“They work hard,” answered Ebon. “And they don’t get many breaks for baths or fresh clothes.” He shook his head, glanced at the road behind them and added, “It don’t seem right.”

Eugene jumped up on the back of the cart and sat next to CC. “I don’t like the way Canon watches us, especially when you’re talking to me.” She huffed and showed her teeth to him as he rode by. “But, I like him.”

CC sniffed again. “You stink, mutt.”

Eugene huffed. “Good. I’m supposed to be a mutt, and mutts stink. Still, the first thing I do when we get home is take a long, hot shower.”

“Keep that mutt up or down, Grandmother!” shouted Canon. “All that jumping is making the horses nervous.”

Eugene stretched her neck to look around CC and barked at him. He laughed, and CC joined him.

“Don’t mind him, Grandmother,” said Wren, who’d jumped into the wagon next to CC to help Ebon drive. “He’s just an old fussbudget.”

“Mutts will be mutts,” CC said as closed her eyes as if to sleep, but Eugene saw her lips twitch.

“Rub it in,” muttered Eugene.

“Grandmother,” Wren said, “do you think the Witches will fix the weather at the alignment?”

At that moment, thunder broke through the heavy clouds that had been following them since they left the hostel, and rain dumped down on them. CC pulled the tarp covering the supplies over her head, and a shudder ran from Eugene’s nose to her tail. As much as she tried, it wouldn’t stop until CC wrapped her arm around her and squeezed.

“Afraid of the storm?” CC asked.

Eugene pulled her head out from under her arm. “After Vegas?

Are you kidding? No telling where we'll end up if we're not together."

"Not really," Wren answered, yelling to be heard over the thunder. "I have to admit, though, they've been coming on so sudden like, it's a bit unnerving."

"There's nothing to be afraid of, Wren," said Ebon. "It'll pass."

A shiver ran through CC's this time, matching Eugene's. "Didn't think about that." She held on to Eugene a little tighter. Eugene pushed her muzzle into CC's armpit.

The storm slowed the wagons, but they kept a steady pace until mud replaced dirt on the road. Canon shouted orders, and the crew pushed the carts from behind as Lucrid and Cannon pulled the horses.

With their own wagon stalled, CC jumped off the wagon. Mud oozed over her feet. "Ew," she muttered to herself before nodding at Eugene. "How about checking out what's going on?"

"Best none of us left the wagon, Grandmother," Ebon shouted as he put an arm around CC's shoulders to hold a piece of tarp over her head.

Eugene ran to the lead wagon, then back. As she checked her pace to match CC's, she shook the water out of her fur even though the rain continued pouring.

"The front wagon's stuck in the mud. If they don't get it moving, Lucrid told Cannon we'll have to make camp here."

CC leaned against Ol'Sassie's great staff as she moved out of the way of the men rushing past her to help with the lead wagon. "Swill and his soldiers will be with us again."

"You think?" asked Wren. "I don't like him much."

Eugene lifted one paw, shook off some mud, and then lifted another to do the same thing. "With all this mud, we'll have to walk, and they're sure to leave us behind. Package or no package."

CC shook her head. "Lucrid won't leave us as long as I have his contraband." She lifted first one foot, then the other out of the mud to move to the front of the caravan. "Damn. Damn. Damn," she

muttered with each step.

“Get back on the wagon, Grandmother,” Wren called over the thunder.

Eugene ran ahead of CC. Cannon and three men pushed as others pulled the horse's reins, but the wagon wouldn’t move. She barked until Cannon looked down at her, then saw CC coming toward them. At the same time, the horses slipped through the mud.

“Watch out!” he shouted, rushing to pick her up and move her to the side.

Wolf Soldiers ran alongside the horses, then peeled out of formation to get their hands on the wagon.

“Push! Push!” yelled Swill.

The wagon lurched forward, its driver pulling hard on the reins to keep the horses from rushing, but not before Lucrid and the soldiers fell face-first into the mud. He stood, laughing and wiping the mud out of his eyes. Eugene ran around him, barking. Lucrid looked to CC, still in Cannon’s arms.

“I knew finding a hag on the road would bring me luck. Tonight, I buy you a feast.”

Eugene picked Lucrid’s hat up out of the mud at his feet and held it out for him.

“Thanks, mutt,” he said. “I’ll buy you a feast, too.”

Cannon set CC down; she picked her way through the mud to stand next to Lucrid and bowed her head. “Joy comes from service.” She then pushed the great staff into the mud and against Lucrid’s toes. “Call me a hag again, and I’ll be hitting your balls instead of your toes to remind you of your manners.”

Lucrid’s eyes widened as he pursed his lips so tightly they turned white. When he opened his mouth, however, he roared with laughter. “Blessings for all the grand dames in the Seven Worlds! Cannon, don’t let my grandmother wade through this mud.”

Cannon shook his head, but gathered CC up in his arms and carried her to the rear wagon as it plodded past them. Eugene

followed, amazed that CC hadn't objected to Cannon carrying her.

"You're a lot of trouble, Grandmother," he whispered. "Best keep that luck coming."

Eugene jumped up on the wagon and tucked herself next to CC under the tarp. "What does that mean?"

CC wrapped her blanket around them both yawned. "He doesn't like the soldiers being so close."

Eugene pushed her muzzle into CC's side. "He's not the only one. Check out Wren."

Ebon sat alone, driving the cart, while Wren tucked herself under the tarp behind CC.

The rain slowed, but didn't stop. More than once, soldiers rushed forward to push a wagon out of a deep pool of mud. Eugene kept close to CC.

"Ugh, I hate wet fur."

CC sighed. "If I were me, we could strike out on our own and get home that much faster."

"But you're an old hag, and I'm an ugly mutt."

CC drifted off to sleep, but not before muttering, "Be the mutt, Eugene. Be the mutt."

EVEN WITH THE SOLDIERS' aid, they didn't make it to the next hostel. The caravan's crew arranged the wagons in a semicircle and huddled under a tarp in the center. The heat of the warming stones drifted up, but the wind carried all warmth away. Eugene peaked out from under the tarp and CC's cloak whenever someone handed CC a cup of stew or a piece of bread.

"They like you," she whispered while licking grease off the meaty bone Ebon gave her. "They say you're lucky."

CC grunted between sips of warm ale.

"Still, if you were really lucky, we'd have made it to the hostel, and we'd be nice and warm by now." A sudden shift in the wind

and she lifted her snout and sniffed. “Rogues are close.”

Lucrid stood and clapped his hands once, then thrice in quick succession. After a pause, he clapped twice more. Cannon joined him, and soon the crew clapped as one. The clapping and the ale warmed even Eugene as Lucrid sang about hot, tiresome roads, and long journeys with no end. Soon, everyone was smiling and humming or singing with him. Even Wren added her sweet voice to the melody.

As Cannon brought the pitcher and refilled CC’s cup, Eugene barked, “You don’t drink this much at home.”

Cannon laughed and bent his face low to Eugene’s. “I got you something for you, too, mutt.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a biscuit still steaming from the bake.

“Rogues are close,” CC muttered.

Cannon stopped, He held the hot biscuit inches away from Eugene’s face. Eugene reached up and bit off half of it.

“That got his attention,” Eugene barked after swallowing

He tossed her the rest of the biscuit and scurried to Lucrid’s side. Lucrid didn’t stop singing as Cannon whispered in his ear, but he smiled and nodded to CC. Eugene licked her lips as Cannon and three other men slid away from the fireside, disappearing in the shadows.

“Did you see that? These guys are good,” said Eugene.

CC nodded. “Figured they had plenty of practice.”

“I’d better take a walk, see what’s going on.”

Eugene stood, but before she could move, CC’s fingers gripped the back of her neck.

“Mutt,” she said, “you’re not a Wolf.”

Eugene pulled away. “Yes, I am. If they attack, Swill will show up. He’s only camped his soldiers out of sight, not out of range of my ears. I can’t let the rogues get caught.”

CC’s grip lessened, but she didn’t remove her hand. Eugene rested her chin on CC’s leg.

“We’re both afraid, but we know what will happen if I can’t

warn them off."

CC released her grip and whispered, "Careful. And I'm barely sipping. The mug's warm, and I'm cold. It relieves the ache in these old bones."

Eugene crawled under the back of CC's protective tarp, away from the heat and the song. The cold wind ruffed her fur, chilling her through to her bones. She sniffed. The rogue pack was creeping in from downwind, but Eugene caught the spicy scent of their hunt in the rustling leaves and heard it in the calls of owls and mice. Cannon and his men planted themselves around the campsite, hiding in bushes. Bart hugged the low limb of a tree above the others, peering into the darkness, but Eugene ran right under him without him noticing. She might have been a mutt, but the stealth of the hunt led her.

She leaped over a trickle of rainwater forming a stream between two boulders. A howl erupted from behind her, followed by shouts from the caravan. Thumps and barks exploded in the night. Eugene turned and leaped back over the stream to get back to Bart. He was soaking wet, lying in leaves and mud. A Werewolf stood over him with one giant paw on his chest. The Wolf opened his mouth, and saliva dripped from his long, white teeth. Bart's arms covered his face as he prepared for the bite.

Eugene lowered her head. Her hackles rose, and she growled. Saliva coated her own lips in anticipation of sinking her teeth into the Wolf's skin and bone. His blood would pour and that heart would pound louder as it slowed. The Werewolf lifted his face, and his eyes widened as the corners of his lips lifted as if mocking her.

Eugene readied to pounce when Cannon ran between her and the Werewolf, his club raised over his head. He didn't stop, but swung as he leaped over Bart, crashing the club down on the Werewolf's head. He yipped, jumped back and rolled onto all fours without taking his eyes off Eugene.

"Run, you stupid mutt!" shouted Cannon.

Nose to nose with the Werewolf, the alpha filled Eugene's brain.

Where he went, so did the pack. She turned and ran away from the caravan and the soldiers, whose calls and feet pounded the muddied earth around her.

Pain ripped through her back as the Werewolf's claw slashed her side. She wanted him to follow her, but she couldn't outrun him as a mutt. A crush of paws on wet followed them, and the sound of a horn reached her through the thumping of her own heart as it beat faster and faster pushing herself to keep running. She only had to run long enough to lead the rogue pack away from the soldiers.

She burst through a bush and fell, rolling down a hill to a clearing. There was still no moon peaking through the clouds, although the rain had stopped. Lightning flashed once, allowing her to see half a dozen Wolves closing in on her. She turned and raised her head to bark at them, but her breath came too fast.

The Werewolves formed a ring around her. She focused on the alpha. Anger poured out of him as wind crushed through leaves and bent limbs, sending birds to the sky. The smell of her own blood excited them both. Her hackles rose as he stepped closer, straightened his back, and readied his legs to pounce. She slowed the beating of her heart listening to his heart do the same. Their heartbeats drowned out the wind, feet running around them, and shouts from the caravan.

"Enough!" a woman cried in the tiny clearing.

All the Wolves turned. CC stood at the top of the hill, barely perceptible among the trees. Only Eugene's nose told her it was CC hunched over and leaning on Ol'Sassi's great staff. Her lungs crackled as she breathed. The alpha looked at CC, then turned back to Eugene. His back legs bent, his front legs poised to leap.

"No!" CC stepped forward, pounding Ol'Sassi's heavy staff into the ground to stop from falling as her foot slipped in soggy, moldy leaves.

Eugene's balance faltered as the ground beneath her paws shook. Her heart skipped as she focused on the alpha Wolf, but he, too, lost his balance and fell to his side. Eugene shook the rain from

her fur as the alpha once more braced to pounce.

Eugene breathed in deep as a shiver ran down her spine. “No fear.”

And then a whisper in the wind reached her ears. “Let it out, Eugene.” The shiver turned into a spark and her heart exploded like thunder as the whisper added, “Show them who you are.”

Eugene wasn’t sure if it was CC’s voice or another oozing out of the earth or from the wind, but the words unleashed a string that had been wrapped around her inner Werewolf. She leaped over the alpha, landing to stand on two legs and tower over CC.

She growled once as moonlight streamed out from between the clouds, bathing the tiny clearing in cool, white light just long enough to blind them. The other Wolves stood with their paws frozen to the ground and stared at her. Eugene put one massive paw on CC’s shoulder as she lowered to sit.

“The soldiers know you’re here,” CC said. The wind carried her gruff, haggard voice down the hill to the Werewolves, but they didn’t move. “Go!”

Still, they didn’t move. The alpha once again rose to stand on two legs stepped forward, towards CC and Eugene. Eugene released a long, low howl she’d wanted to cry since arriving in the Wildes. The alpha and his pack replied, and then the alpha lowered his head to bow. As one, the pack ran swiftly and silently into the trees as the clouds once more shut away the moon.

Eugene blinked as she realized she was no longer the Werewolf, but the mutt.

“I saw your tattoos,” CC said even as her shoulders slumped and her head fell forward to rest on the old staff. She used the staff to help her turn around, which disturbed the top wrapping enough that it slipped off. “We should get back to the caravan.”

Eugene stared in the direction the Wolves had run and moaned before turning to follow CC. “I’m still me! How did I do it? And why am I a mutt again?” She jumped in front of CC, causing her to stumble. “What’s wrong?”

CC closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. “Tired.” Rolling her shoulders back, she added, “Can you get us back to the camp without running into soldiers?”

Eugene jumped on to a fallen tree and sniffed the air. “Not likely, but the rogues are too far away for the soldiers to follow. You sure you’re okay?”

CC nodded. “Just stay close.”

Three of Swill’s Werewolves ran past them. One stopped and turned to look at Eugene, but said nothing before turning to catch up to her comrades.

“Hope the captain doesn’t take it out on them that the rogues got away.” Eugene jumped in front of CC and moved a stick out of her way.

“Let’s hope he doesn’t take it out on us,” said CC. “And stop moving sticks! I’m old, not an invalid.”

“That you, Grandmother?” Lucrid shouted from the other side of the stream.

Eugene barked and ran ahead to stand at the stream across from Lucrid.

“I see you’re safe enough,” Lucrid said. “You look better off than some of my folk.”

He pointed behind him to where two men carried Bart on a stretcher.

CC yelled, “Many hurt?”

“Nothing but bumps and bruises. Young Bart will have a nice little scar on his forehead to impress future sweethearts.” He jumped across the stream, picked up CC, and started back for the other side. “You’ll have to fend for yourself, mutt.”

AS SOON AS Cannon emptied his tankard, a newcomer bought him another, patted him on the back, and said, “Tell us about the Painted Wolf.”

Cannon gulped down as much as he could in one breath before raising his voice to tell his story again. “Should’ve seen it. Bart there falls out of the tree, waving his arms like he’ll fly away, and the meanest Werewolf you ever seen pounces on him, ready to bite. Me, I’m charging to him and raise my club to smack his head. That’s when this ugly Werewolf goes after our ugly mutt, but before it can get far, this Painted Wolf—bigger than any I ever seen—leaps on top of him. They roll and roll, biting and snapping, and then the Painted Wolf lets out such a howl, you’d think the queen witch herself was coming.”

Swill grunted through clenched teeth, “There’s no such thing as a Painted Wolf.”

Eugene lost count of the times Swill said that phrase since he arrived to aid the caravan. Now, as they sat in the hostel for an extra night so Bart could recover from his injuries, he repeated the phrase with less conviction, even as Cannon’s story grew longer and bolder.

Cannon lifted yet another tankard to an appreciative townie and insisted, “Like nothing I’d ever seen. It leaped right over me.”

Eugene didn’t recall leaping over Canon or rolling on the ground with the alpha, but she wasn’t about to protest when Lucrid tossed another piece of meat to her under the table.

“Lightning flashed, the ground shook. It gave me only the quickest of looks. It had twirls and lines in so many colors, I can’t even name them all.”

Swill slammed his mug on the table. “That’s because you didn’t see them, old man. There’s no such thing as a Painted Wolf!”

Swill’s right leg bounced up and down, and Eugene smelled fear oozing off his skin and in every breath, but there was something else she couldn’t make out. She closed her eyes to breathe it in, then shook her head and inched her way to the far end of the table to sit next to CC, who was sitting all too still on her stool near the warming stones. She circled CC before lying at her feet and caught Lucrid staring at her.

He winked and turned his attention to Cannon. “You see more colors and designs with every drink, Cannon.”

The townies and other travelers laughed.

“How many times have you heard the tale of the Painted Wolf?” Lucrid asked the townie sitting next to Cannon. “Every time he tells it, that blasted Wolf is bigger and more painted than before.”

The townie laughed and patted Cannon’s back, sending both of their heads bobbing too close to the table. “Ain’t that so, but you tell it well, friend. Another round here.”

The barmaid arrived with the pitcher as Swill stood, glaring at Cannon. “There’s no such thing as a Painted Wolf.” He turned and shouted to Owen, “Put out an extra watch tonight!”

Eugene lay her head on her paws and half closed her eyes. For the first time since meeting the soldiers, Owen didn’t jump off his bench when Swill yelled an order, but his dark eyes strayed away from Cannon to Swill as he nodded before pushing himself to his feet. He downed the last of his ale and walked to the small room where the Wolves waited, not sleeping but sitting and staring at the crowd in the great room.

Swill glared at Lucrid, and muttered, “Best keep your man under control. This talk’s dangerous.”

“Can’t control what people say,” Lucrid answered, his usual smile mixed with mischief. “Besides, it’s only a story, and will soon be forgotten.”

“Hmm,” muttered Swill as he pushed through the crowd to the front door.

“I don’t like it,” CC murmured.

Eugene sat up and put a paw on her lap. “You’re awake! You okay? You’ve been asleep so long that I thought you might be hurt. You’re not hurt, are you…”

CC put her hand on Eugene’s head.

“You’ve got a good mutt there, Grandmother,” Lucrid said, picking up his mug and sliding his stool next to CC’s. “Always seems to be where the action is.”

CC sniffed, but didn't respond. Eugene growled and pushed herself between them.

Lucrid laughed. "Good little mutt to have around, eh? We leave at first light."

Eugene looked at CC, who watched as the front door opened and another group of townies arrived to hear the story of the Painted Wolf. The soldiers made their way out as two more men entered with their heads and faces covered by low hoods.

"Soldiers?" CC asked, turning to Lucrid.

"The captain's nervous. He's sent for more Wolf Soldiers."

Eugene tilted her head. The inflection in Lucrid's voice meant something, and she wanted to know more, but at that moment, Cannon stood to show his audience how big the Painted Wolf was, only to sway and fall back to his seat. The crowd erupted with more laughter, and after he was given a fresh tankard, Cannon laughed along with them as he resumed his tale with more bravado and a larger Painted Wolf than he last tale..

Lucrid leaned over Eugene and got close to CC's ear. "There've always been tales of a Painted Wolf leading the Werewolves to freedom. What do you think?"

"Rubbish," Wren interjected, leaning over her tankard. "There's no such thing as a Painted Wolf. Didn't you hear the captain?"

Eugene reached up and nipped Lucrid's arm before barking at him and snarling at Wren.

Lucrid laughed. "Early start, Cannon! Make sure the wagons are ready."

Cannon wobbled to his feet and slurred, "Aye, Lucrid."Bart! Oh, he's still in bed. Who the hell isn't in bed?" Ebon stood and slid his arm around Cannon's waist."Good night friends!"

Lucrid stood. "If I don't watch him, no telling what he'll pack. First light, mutt. Be ready."

Eugene put both her front paws on CC's lap and pushed her muzzle close to CC's face.

"Not in my face, Eugene," CC whispered, fanning her face. "Your

breath."

"Just making sure you were awake enough to know what's going on." Eugene gathered some of the hearthrug and part of CC's torn skirt into the perfect pile for sleep. "Wren knows something."

"Easy, mutt," muttered CC.

One of the men with low hoods moved close to the warming stones. He rubbed his hands together before throwing a pinch of charging powder on the stones. Eugene sniffed. The smell of herbs and wine boiling in the heat filled Eugene's brain with winter and home, but it didn't cloud the scent of the alpha she'd almost had to fight. Her hackles rose and her lips lifted, showing off her fangs in the firelight, wet and ready to bite.

He nodded to Eugene, even as he leaned over to stir his mug. "Peace, friend."

Eugene's ears twitched at his deep, melodious voice, full of the wind in the trees, tall grass in a meadow, and long, dark runs over crackling leaves.

"Peace, friend," CC repeated.

"I don't like him," said Eugene. Nonetheless, Eugene lowered her hackles and rested her muzzle on her paws.

"I beg your pardon, Painted Wolf," the man murmured as he rose. "Our scent is masked by a spell, but clearly you know who we are. Had I known—"

Swill pushed the front door open, and an icy wind filled the room. "Owen! I told you to get those lazy Wolves out of their beds."

CC brought her mug to her lips. "Follow the caravan, but not too close."

She swallowed and lowered her head before letting out a snore. Eugene looked at her face just as her eyes closed. When she looked back at the warming stones, the alpha and his companion were walking out the door in the midst of another group of townsmen. Wren followed them.

Teaser put his toes in the water; the cold sent a chill up his spine. He smiled and looked back over his shoulder. Ari still lay on his back in the tree where they'd slept last night, staring at his fingers.

"Come down, Ari!" he called out. "Water feels good."

"They're so long," he said, making two enormous fists, then spreading his fingers and waving them between his face and the sun. "Are you sure they're my real fingers? You haven't spelled them to look this way?"

Teaser sighed. "Three days of fast marching with tales and lore and rules and magic, and it is your fingers that concern you most. Once we cross, we'll be in Goblin territory. You won't have time to admire them once we get there. You must be fully primed."

Ari dropped from the tree. His new toes—wrapped with the rest of his feet in a soft material that wasn't leather, but felt like it—gripped the earth. He smiled and dropped his arms back to his sides instead of using them for balance. "I remember; I've paid attention. Give me a break. Besides, it's been days since we've seen anybody."

Teaser pursed his lips together as he shielded his eyes with his hand. "I see no one, but I smell Goblin."

Ari lifted his face, closed his eyes, and inhaled deeply through his nose. "I don't have your nose, but I smell trees, grass, water, and you."

He scratched his head and took in another deep breath.

"And where am I?" asked Teaser.

Ari opened his eyes and laughed. "Hey, how did you get behind me?"

"Use all your senses. You did not smell me on the wind, but you smell Goblin."

Ari nodded and looked across the water. "Cool, let's go meet them."

Teaser grabbed Ari's shoulder as he stepped into the river. "You do not swim."

Ari looked down. "It's shallow."

"Are you certain?" Teaser picked up a stone and tossed it into

the middle of the river. It sank as its ripples grew larger and larger, then splashed their ankles.

"Oh."

"Oh," mocked Teaser. "Goblins sink. We must approach water with great care."

Ari nodded, then suddenly grinned. "That's why you never let us go swimming!"

"Duh is the most appropriate response to that." Teaser picked up the rucksack he found along the way and led them into the trees. "Unless I mistake our position, which is not likely, a crossing exists in a village close to the headwaters. If my toes do not deceive me, we are but two miles from there. We will make our way and cross when all are asleep."

He stopped when he realized Ari wasn't following him.

He stood staring across the river and pointing. "Why not ask them for help?"

Teaser leaped back to Ari and pulled him under the cover of the trees. "Where?"

Ari lowered a branch and pointed again. "Two o'clock."

Teaser squinted until he saw a figure moving in the shadows of the brush opposite them. "Did it see us?"

"He looked right at me," replied Ari. "I assume he's a Goblin; he's very short and red all over, with large eyes."

Teaser pulled on Ari's arm. "Come, we must move with great speed and hope it recognized neither of us."

Ari hurried to catch up with him. "Why? And how would he recognize me?"

Teaser turned back to Ari and scratched his chin as his eyes ran up and down his charge. "Perhaps your anonymity will be to our advantage." He walked around Ari, then reached up and pulled the hood of his cloak low over his face. "Do not be seen."

"But Teaser—"

Teaser looked into Ari's round eyes and put his hand on Ari's chest. "Precautions. Once you are known, changes will happen:

changes some have longed for, changes some have feared."

"But what about Arika?"

ARI PULLED the rucksack off the bottom limb of the tree and tossed it to Teaser.

"I am unaccustomed to the heights you now reach without assistance, but it clearly has advantages," Teaser said, winking at Ari.

Ari shrugged. "I've been taller than you since Christmas. You just didn't want to admit it."

"This is true." Teaser nodded. "Arika's squeal of delight as you stood next to me before dinner that night spoke notes most true. When you have a charge of your own, and one day he or she delights in any advantage gained over your age, you, too, will feel the sting of your heart strumming the first notes of separation."

"Sorry…I think."

Teaser laughed, and for the first time since they arrived in the Wildes, he relaxed. "We all grow, reaching for tomorrow. And as you are now the larger of us and most assuredly more ready for labor, you carry the sack."

He tossed it to Ari and headed for the trail that led directly into the village and to the ferry. The sun sank before they reached their destination. Teaser bent over the road and sniffed, motioning for Ari to do the same.

"Goblins?" Ari asked as he followed Teaser's example and sniffed the air.

Teaser nodded. "Perhaps this morning or last night. This is a Goblin trail. Notice how it weaves around trees and bushes. Humans make straight trails, expecting nature to move for them."

Ari straightened and looked down at Teaser, still squatting next to the trail. "But plants don't move."

Teaser stepped onto the trail. "All living things move. Pull your

hood low."

Ari followed, pulling at the hood of his cloak until he had to bend his neck to see out from under it. "Teaser, you still haven't explained why you don't want anyone to see my face. If I've never been here, how would anyone know who I am?"

Teaser didn't stop to look at him, but kept his focus on the trail and the thick forest around them as he whispered, "Are you certain no one from here did not see you there?"

"But—" Ari stopped when Teaser turned his head and glared, putting a finger over his lips. Whispering, Ari tried again. "But you and Aunt Ricia had spells to make me look human. You said no one could see my real face."

"I said no humans could see your true face." Teaser stopped and squatted, motioning for Ari to do the same. "Beyond the next turn. You hear their voices?" Ari nodded. "The village houses only a few humans and Goblins. Their employment provides succor to those who need rest and to cross the river. When I was young, more lived here. Many traveled the roads and crossed the rivers, and more stories were told." He shook his head with a sigh. "Now, I fear what we may find. This may yet prove the most dangerous part of our journey."

Ari put his hand on Teaser's shoulder before standing. "Then we'd better get it over with."

"SEE," Ari said as the ferryman pushed them away from shore. "That wasn't so bad."

While the pudgy man with the bulbous nose wasn't pleased about being woken up, he set aside his grumbling when Teaser offered him a gold coin.

Teaser intensified his stare as more of the approaching shore, and snapped, "Keep your voice down!"

The ferryman chuckled. "Kids!"

Teaser turned and glared at the ferryman, but it had no effect on his glum face and bored eyes.

With a grunt, the ferryman plunged his staff to the bottom of the river and muttered, “Hang on to something. This is where it gets rough after all these storms we’ve had. Too much rain and snow has made the river swell.”

Teaser gripped the side of the ferry as it shifted beneath them; a branch or a log bumped into the bottom of it, and Teaser looked at Ari, he stood straight and at his full height with his hand gently resting on the side rail.

The ferryman lifted his staff high before thrusting it down again; his weight helped push the ferry closer to shore. Teaser and the ferryman let out a long breath at the same time.

“If the rains keep up,” said the ferryman, “the ferry won’t be able to make the crossing…not that it makes it too much anymore.”

Ari turned to look at the ferryman, and before Teaser could stop him, he asked, “Why?”

“Nobody around to pay, is there?” The ferryman spat into the river. “Goblins want little company these days, and you lot are the first to pay for a long time. Most prefer to sneak across themselves or steal my ferry.”

“That’s rude,” said Ari.

The ferryman laughed. “Rude? Downright nasty if you ask me. The old ferryman took me on when I was only small. My mum’s a Goblin, but he didn’t care. Nobody did back then.”

“Better times,” Teaser said, nodding.

“They’ll be good again,” Ari said with such authority, Teaser had to turn around and make certain it was Ari who’d spoken.

“Not soon enough for me. I got kids of my own to think about now.” The ferryman pushed once more, then set his staff down and moved to the front of the ferry, where he picked up a rope with a loop at the end. Before he tossed it over the mooring pillar, he looked back at Teaser. “You sure about being here? They won’t take kindly to another blue.”

Teaser pulled Ari's hood back over his head, "Keep it low," he said between clenched teeth.

After a deep breath, he bowed his head to the ferryman. "We are both certain. Many thanks for your concern."

The ferryman tugged the rope and pulled the ferry to the shore. He pointed to a dark lantern nailed to a tall pole. "When you're ready, light the signal, and I'll come for you…if I can."

TEASER RUSHED to catch up with Ari, but he was too late. He'd already stepped though the tree line to the road. A screech from his right preceded something thudding against his torso; he skidded across the ground and almost into the water. Hands gripped his shoulders, pulling him out of the water and tearing through his shirt to his skin. He reached up to throw a punch when he realized Ari was pulling him toward the trees.

"No!" Teaser shouted. "Stay on the road."

Ari continued to pull Teaser, but he changed direction and headed for the center of the road. Teaser shook off the boy's grip and cupped his right hand while singing to himself. Then, turning to run backward, he threw the source of the tingling sensation in his fingertips behind him. Their pursuers yelped and jumped back as darts made of green light bit into their skin.

Ari almost tripped trying to turn back to see what made the odd noise, but Teaser caught him and pushed him forward.

"Don't stop! We can outrun them," he shouted, pushing against his back. "Move!"

Ahead of them, a line of small Goblins with fangs peaking out of long, thin mouths blocked their path.

Teaser pushed himself forward, put his hands on his hips, and braced his feet firmly on the earthen road. "What's this? Goblins stopping Goblins? Shame on you and your kin. Let us pass."

Two of the red Goblins standing in the line before them shifted

aside, and a tall, pale purple Goblin dressed in armor and purple silks stepped between them. “The shame is on you, Teaser Agate Theaceae. Breaking your vow enables us to demand justice.”

Teaser inhaled, allowing his chest to expand. “I am no oath breaker—unlike you, Aural. My quest demands my presence at the Keep. Step aside and let us pass.”

Aural spat. “You are not welcome here. Nor are any of your pitiful associates welcome here.”

“Brave words flow from those too small to stand alone,” growled Teaser.

“Teaser,” Ari hissed under his breath.

Teaser took one step forward, but stopped and turned as the sound of clawed feet scrabbled across the ground and Ari screamed. Teaser turned to see him pushed to the ground by four red Goblins determined to pin his arms and legs to the ground. Ari squirmed to push them off even as more red Goblins leaped on Teaser’s back, pushing him down. Claws cut into his neck, and fingers clenched into stone fists beat his face. He opened his mouth to call for Ari, but someone broke his jaw. Their roar of victory echoed in his ears until it was replaced by a deep, dark voice that reverberated through the ground, the forest, and the night itself.

“Get off!”

Teaser pushed himself to his feet as the red Goblins knelt on one knee with their heads bowed. Teaser turned; behind him stood Ari with his hood back and his long, blue hair spread over his shoulders. Teaser strained his neck to look up into Ari’s face because he towered over them all, almost reaching the top of the trees.

Teaser forced his jaw back into place as he turned, expecting Aural to launch a counterattack. Instead, Aural had also dropped to one knee and bowed his head.

“From my heart to my soul, I beg forgiveness, Lost Ringlet.” He glanced at Teaser. “And I pledge to learn from my failure to honor you, Teaser Agate Theaceae, the humblest and noblest of teachers.”

Teaser bowed. “We are honored to witness the enlightening of so great a warrior, Aural.” He waved his hand for Ari to return to a natural size, but he only shrugged. Teaser cleared his throat. “Will you, Aural, deliver the news that our Lost Ringlet is no longer lost, but returns to our Ringleader’s side before dawn breaks over these woods?”

Aural jumped to his feet. “With the greatest of pleasure do I accept such an honor.” He bowed first to Teaser, then to Ari. “These soldiers will line your path that it is with ease and joy you return home.”

Ari’s gaze jumped from Teaser to Aural. “Thank you?”

Without another word, Aural turned and sprinted down the road. The red Goblins scattered; four followed Aural while the others split up. Half stood at attention along the side of the road, their long spears standing straight and tall to form a line between them and the forest. The other half scattered, shouting and calling to others.

Teaser stretched and twisted to heal the bruises and cuts on his body. Ari remained standing and very, very tall.

“It begins,” Teaser muttered to himself. “Come, my very large Ringlet. Let me guide you home.”

Ari took a step forward. “How do—?”

Teaser interrupted him with a loud, firm voice. “How do you manifest with such determination, my dedicated charge? It is a magic that perhaps one day you will share.” He motioned for Ari to bend closer to him. “Remember your lessons. Mind and soul, heart and body; they all flow together.”

By the time they reached the first curve in the road, Ari had returned to his normal height and was attempting to not stare at the red Goblins or their fierce, burning eyes.

Teaser leaned in and whispered, “Whatever you do from now on, do not let others know you do not know what you are doing.”

They’d walked barely half a mile when they spotted other Goblins filling in the gaps in the line of red Goblins along the edge

of the road. Many stood at attention, as the red Goblins did, but others stood behind, gaping and pointing. Teaser tapped Ari's arm more than once, reminding him to hold his head up and not slouch. By the time they reached the Goblin's Keep, there were as many Goblins walking behind them as were lining the roads.

Teaser held his breath as they rounded the final curve in the road, then stopped. "So different from the last time."

"How so?"

Teaser looked up at Ari and saw his eyes widen as he took in the great outer wall carved from the stone of the Goblin Mountain. Hanging from the top of the wall, colorful banners lit by hundreds of glowing stones fluttered in the wind. Hundreds of faces peered over the edge to witness the Lost Ringlet's return.

"Don't be afraid," Teaser said as softly as he could.

Ari looked down at him and smiled. "This is awesome—nothing like the movies."

Teaser studied his young charge—the boy who was always afraid of doing the wrong thing and slouching behind his twin—and for the first time, he saw curiosity overtake his fear.

"Good," he said as he motioned them forward. "Be cautious, and remember what I've taught you."

Ari nodded and stepped forward as the Great Gates opened. Not the small doors used every day to bring in food and supplies or to take out the bounty of the earth, and certainly not the small side door Teaser had run out of all those years ago: the Great Gates only opened to send out armies and to welcome home a long-lost heir whose return promised peace. Massive pennons trailed out and flowed in the soft, late-night winds. Lights of every color exploded in the air as a massive roar of welcome erupted from the crowd. And, in the center of the opening, stood one old, gray Goblin leaning on a massive oak root with its long, gray beard and mass of gray fur tangled in its offshoots. It tapped the great root once, and the earth echoed that thump before silence filled the air and the forest around them.

Ari approached the withered old Goblin and bowed low. Teaser fought to suppress the smile forming on his lips, but pride swelled in his chest as the old Goblin smiled beneath the long, tangled hair and put its hand on Ari's head.

"Welcome home, progeny of my progeny, and next Ringleader of the Inner Circle."

THICK, blue fingers wrapped around Teaser's shoulder. "You can't be here. Even the Great Ringleader cannot overturn an edict once written."

Teaser shook off Mandrake's grip, bowed low, and smiled. "Well met, Mandrake. When last I heard your name spoken, you were so young, you had yet to discover a voice. Seeing the young grow verifies the turmoil of the aged. And now that your cousin has arrived, you must feel great relief that you no longer may be called upon to lead us."

Mandrake's lips lifted in a snarl, and his blue eyes burned like an ocean on fire. "Your misdeeds find you at last. Did you think you would be forgiven because you brought the line of the Great Ringleader home? Your banishment will now—"

Teaser lifted a finger to his lips as the single base note of the bell in the Great Hall sounded. "Our Ringleader speaks."

Mandrake's eyes narrowed, and he did not remove his gaze from Teaser, who fought the urge to cringe even as he leaned closer to Mandrake's ear.

"Who, in your most excellent estimation, secured my services for the locating and protecting of this, one of two, most special offspring?" Teaser turned until Mandrake's face came back into view. The burning ocean in his eyes faded as they widened and fixated on the Ringleader and Ari standing on the platform in front of all the Goblins. "Besides, the edict for my banishment was never signed."

Teaser suppressed a satisfied grin as anger oozed from Mandrake's every pore.

Mandrake rolled his shoulders back. "We shall see how welcome you are. There is the issue of you returning with only one."

Teaser shrugged, both to ease the pain from Mandrake's venom and to hide the shudder of fear that washed over him.

He watched as Ari knelt in front of the Great Ringleader, just as Teaser had taught him. The Goblins in the hall rejoiced.

"The kin of my own Ring," he muttered to himself as Ari stood and scanned the crowd. They locked eyes, and Teaser smiled. "All will be well. It must."

TEASER POLISHED the buttons of his vest, tugged his collar, and adjusted his hat. He walked to the far side of Ari's dressing room, checked that the door was locked, and returned to his spot behind Ari, who stood as still as he could while Phenacite fastened the clasp of his cloak under his neck.

"Teaser," Ari said, rolling his eyes. "Will you please stop? I'm nervous enough as it is. The door is just as locked now as it was the last time you checked."

Phenacite said nothing, but glared at Teaser through thinning silver hair.

Teaser lifted his lip in a snarl. "My own nerves shimmer and shake in anticipation. And please, no contractions. We have spoken of the disdain with which we Goblins hold them."

"Whatever." Ari shook his head. "I don't—" He stopped and took a quick breath. "I do not know that whether or not I use contractions will make much of a difference with the Inner Ring."

Teaser grimaced. "The Inner Ring is most important to—"

"I know," Ari interjected. "You've—I mean, you have told me this often enough. They are the leaders of all the other Goblin Rings."

Phenacite stepped away from Ari, nodding. “Most regal, Ringlet.” He turned to Teaser. “If you will forgive my interference, Teaser has been away too long. We have made some progress in time conservation since he last walked amongst the dwellers of the Inner Ring.”

“Thank you, Phenacite.” Teaser led him to the door and opened it for him. “I shall take your words to heart.”

“Chill, Teaser,” Ari said with a sigh. He smiled at Phenacite. “What is your advice?”

Teaser shook his head, clasped his hands behind his back, and paced the room, mumbling.

“Ignore him,” Ari said to Phenacite.

Phenacite smiled and bowed. “I recall when Teaser first entered the Inner Ring. He was as impatient then as he is today, but fond memories will serve neither of us at present.” He clasped his long, gray hands and let his sleeves fall to cover them. “You are young, Ringlet, and while so many of the Ringleaders struggle to recall our early years, we are not foolish enough to believe you and you alone have the skills to lead the Inner Ring. You know nothing of your position or your people, and—if I may be so bold—you have much to learn.”

“Exactly!” Ari threw his arms in the air. “That’s what I keep telling everybody. I even tried to tell my grandfather, but he keeps saying I’m ready. I’m not even fifteen yet. Does anyone around here ever listen?”

“Ari!” Teaser snapped. “Remember who you are speaking to.”

Phenacite laughed and shook his head.

“Phenacite, Seer of the Seers, Chief Advisor to the Ringleaders, Holder of the Sacred…” Ari stopped and closed his eyes. “Wait, I know it. It’s on the tip of my…Holder of the Sacred Bonds of Mother’s Embrace.”

“Well done, Ringlet,” said Phenacite. “I have many more titles, but you conveyed the most important ones.”

“Thank you. And, do you have to keep calling me Ringlet?” Ari

smirked. “It sounds ridiculous.”

“Ari!” exclaimed Teaser.

Phenacite shook his head. “No, Teaser. He cannot embrace a heritage he has never known.”

Teaser laughed out loud until tears ran down his cheeks. “Thank you, Phenacite. I recall why I have always liked you.” As he wiped away the last of the tears, he bowed. “My humblest gratitude, Phenacite. Now, will you announce the Ringlet’s approach to the Inner Ring?”

“With all humility, old friend.” Phenacite bowed.

Ari watched the Goblin’s silver train disappear before the door closed. “You don’t really like him, do you, Teaser?”

“No.” Teaser stood in front of Ari’s mirror, pulling his shoulders back and adjusting the position of his hat. “He’s no old fool, and don’t forget it. He’s cunning and cruel, but he’ll give his life to protect you as long as you are the Ringlet. I know it’s a silly name to your ears, but it means everything to the Goblins in the other room.”

Ari nodded. “I know. I’m doing the best I can, but if Arika was here, we’d—.” He stopped and shook his head. “At least she’s safe with the Witches. And then there’s Mandrake. He makes me nervous.”

Teaser brushed nonexistent dust off of Ari’s shoulder and led him to the door separating them from the sanctum of the Inner Ring.

Ari closed his eyes and straightened his back to stand at his full height. “I am ready.”

“I know.” Teaser opened the door. “You should fear Mandrake for now. He’s not much older than you, but he knows how a Goblin Ringlet should behave.” Smiling wider than he had in ages, he looked Ari over. “But you are far more clever than he will ever be.”

Earth—fresh, loose, loamy, and fertile—filled Teaser’s nose as he followed Ari into the next room. By the time Ari took his place in the empty chair next to the Ringleader, lonely and hunched on the

throne, magic tickled his fingers and toes. The sweet smell, however, mixed with the greed and the lust of the Ringleaders who stood waiting, watching.

Teaser bit back a smile as Ari sat straight and tall, his shoulders square and his head still even as his breaths came in and out silently and slowly.

Phenacite stood to the left side of the dais with his head bowed, not watching Ari or the others, but Teaser saw his pointed ears twitch through his long, silver hair. Those gnarled fingers, strengthened from years of gripping the amulet of his station so tightly, it should have been crushed, were ready to pounce, but on whom?

Ringleader Chalce's face remained frozen in its constant sneer even as drool trickled out the corner of its wide mouth from red lips so thin they almost weren't there. It wore the same snarl all the Reds wore, but as Ringleader, Chalce's snarl emphasized the red eyes peering through shadow and light, searching for trouble and treachery. Teaser studied those deep eyes and let out a momentary sigh. What the Reds lacked in stature, they made up for in viciousness, aggression, and loyalty. Ancient Ringleaders designated them as the Inner Ring's guards for good reason. Goblin Ringleaders might despise each other, but none would cross a Red without an army.

Teaser basked for a moment in the light of Mother, as it glowed in the pale, perfect sphere in the center of the circle formed by the Ringleaders. They'd waited two days for everyone to arrive: two days for Teaser's stomach to twist and turn, but Ari hadn't worried. Without Arika to guide him, he watched and listened and learned more than Teaser had ever before believed possible.

All eyes gleamed and burned in Mother's glow. Even Ari's, so deep and blue, sparkled like a sunset on the ocean. Teaser whispered a small song of thanks for this chance to see Mother's Heart again.

Aurum grunted and looked at Ari. Teaser held his breath as Ari

stood, nodded to his grandfather, then bowed to the circle.

“Thank you all for receiving me upon my return to my home.”

Ari’s voice echoed through the room with only the slightest hint of hesitation. Teaser lifted his gaze to the Ringleaders; their eyes twinkled in the light of Mother, but no faces changed.

“I have been away from Mother far too long and have much to learn if you will allow me to follow the path of all Goblins to serve Mother,” Ari continued. “Our Great Ringleader Aurum places faith in the pride of place among all the Peoples of the Wildes to ensure the health and well-being of Mother.”

Teaser put his hand over his mouth to hide his grin. Ari’s voice, while young, contained the first hints of adulthood. He kept to his script even as many of the Ringleaders turned their heads and grunted or even openly growled at being placed in with all the other Peoples of the Wildes.

“Now are our Rings complete. Let us strategize and prescribe the best method to heal our Mother’s Heart.”

Ari sat. His eyes darted between his grandfather and Teaser. Teaser nodded in approval even as the moment he most dreaded arrived.

“It has been many ages since Mother asked for our help,” said Phenacite. “Our offerings and spells, while easing Mother’s pain, do not lessen—”

“We all know what’s going on,” grunted Aurum. “No time for history lessons or formalities. Let’s get on with it. My old bones complain.”

To emphasize his point, he held up a hand covered with golden rings, but its skin no longer glowed. Instead, it hung loose like his shining robe of gold.

“Yes, Ringleader Aurum.” Phenacite bowed. “With Ringlet Ari rightfully in place, the first part of the cure is in place. I had confirmation today that Ringlet Arika is well and in the Witches' care. Healing is within sight.”

Teaser’s toes gripped the earth beneath him as he resisted the

urge to jump on the dais and demand how Phenacite knew what the Witches were up to. Ari leaned forward just enough to turn his head toward Phenacite, but said nothing. Teaser closed his eyes to focus on calming his fears.

Phenacite continued, “Bring forward the offerings of your Rings.”

Teaser scratched his chin and bent his ear toward Ari, who whispered, “How does he know?”

Teaser shrugged as Amazo’s mellifluous voice floated over him.

“We bring the first stone from the depths of the North Mountain in offering.” His pale, blue-green hand held up a diamond so large that his clawed fingers barely contained it. It captured the light from Mother’s orb and refracted it throughout the chamber. “With this, all the colors of our world mingle. This will remind Mother of our pledge for peace.”

Teaser leaned close to Ari again. “Don’t stare. You’ve seen diamonds before.”

“It’s bigger than the one at the—”

“Not now.”

Amazo glided forward and placed the diamond on the platform surrounding Mother’s Heart. A young Goblin standing behind Phenacite and in similar white, silvery robes rang a bell. The sweet tone echoed around them, and Teaser closed his eyes as it mixed with the song of Mother.

Ringleader Salix limped forward, his broad shoulders swaying, and his long, gray-green ringlets filled with earth and leaves rustling with each step. A younger version of Salix stepped forward, laying a pale brown staff on the platform.

“The root of the first tree,” Salix’s deep, husky voice rumbled through the chamber, “carved by the fingers of time with the song of Mother.”

The young priest behind Phenacite rang the bell. Again, Teaser closed his eyes as Mother’s song touched his mind until the Goblin he knew would interrupt it spoke at last.

“Ringleader.” Mandrake’s cool voice slithered through the air.

Teaser opened one eye, afraid of what the young, ambitious Goblin might do. Even Chalce’s ears twitched on either side of his round head. Mandrake smiled, but his deep blue eyes glared from beneath thin, shaggy eyebrows, and his smile invited challenge.

“The gifts we bring will no doubt please Mother, and I beg you to forgive me the candor of my youth,” he said, “but you did ask for haste.”

Phenacite stepped forward, but Aurum grumbled, “Speak, but keep this thing going.”

Teaser watched Aurum’s old face and recognized the darkening of his golden eyes that turned into storms swirling with lightning for the warning that it was. Teaser turned to find that the grin on Mandrake’s face had brightened. Teaser tightened his fist behind his back.

“I’ve read much of these troubles,” said Mandrake. “The old books tell us to gather our treasures as tribute and wrap them in charmed bones. Until we have those, our tributes are useless.”

“Charmed bones?” The words dropped from Ari’s mouth like a stone in a still pond.

Teaser stepped forward and bowed to the Ringleaders. “I am so pleased to see that the young still devote themselves to their studies. This is very interesting, and charmed bones should be easy enough to find. There’s always someone around with bones to sell, and with Phenacite’s excellent skills in charming, we shall soon have all the necessary components to heal Mother.”

“Good,” Ari said, standing. “Let’s go find some.”

Teaser bowed to Mandrake. “Shall we see what we might procure from the storeroom? We may well have some from the last time Mother stirred.”

Mandrake cleared his throat and bowed low to Ari. “With the greatest respect, cousin, considering the gravity of Mother’s illness, we should authorize the use of fresh bones. If the situation is as dire as the Witches say, then we’ll need our tribute to be wrapped only

in the most sacred of bones. Old ones lying around would hardly be sufficient to strengthen the song of Mother's Heart."

Teaser turned to Ari and rolled his eyes, then stretched his neck and took in a long breath. "A most ominous and perhaps dangerous task, what with Mother shaking and stirring, breaking the roads and rivers."

"Indeed," Mandrake said, smiling. "And from those on whom we all depend to ensure the well-being and security of all Goblins, a great sacrifice is required."

Teaser gritted his teeth. Mandrake was cunning.

"Absolutely right, cousin," Ari said as he stepped off the dais.

Mandrake bowed with a grin so smug it made his deep blue lips seem almost pink.

"As I am leading the expedition to the High Meadow to deliver our gifts, as is my duty as the next Ringleader, I will seek the sacred bones along the way. When I deliver our gifts, I will have the proper gift for Mother," Ari said. Teaser raised his hand to stop him, but he continued. "Teaser, as my guardian, will come with me."

Teaser cringed as Mandrake's face brightened even more, but Ari wasn't done.

"We'll have to travel fast, so only a small party should go. To ensure all is done correctly, my cousin, Mandrake, certainly must come. As the one who found the solution, I'll depend on you to see it's done right. Phenacite, although your knowledge is great, you must remain here; our Ringleader needs you. Please select the minimum but necessary number of acolytes to help us carry the offerings. Ringleader Chalce, I request the smallest company you feel comfortable with for our security. Who else, Teaser?"

Teaser's belly churned with laughter, but he forced his expression to remain neutral. A moment ago smugness oozed out of Mandrake. Now, his face was pale, glittering with sweat, and his mouth hung open.

"Ringlet," he managed, "you honor me. However—"

It was too late. Ari embraced his cousin even as the other

Ringleaders nodded and applauded the new Ringlet's decisiveness.

"Just think, cousin; we'll soon be on the road together! This is a serious journey, but I expect we'll become good friends," Ari exclaimed. "I didn't know I had any family aside from Arika and my aunt, and now I get to go on a long journey with my cousin. It'll be fun!"

Mandrake bowed as Ari walked out and the other Ringleaders began congratulating themselves on arriving at such a good plan. Teaser watched him stare at Ari's back; crystal blue eyes raged in the light of Mother's Heart.

"Teaser!" Ari shouted without looking back. "Let's get moving."

STARS GLITTERED in the glassy waters flowing too quickly to notice, except by those forced to cross the river on a moonless night. His body ached, and the bruises on Teaser's heart bled freely. He shifted from one foot to the other, listening for arrows and angry words.

His own Ringleader could not banish him from the Keep, not with his connection to the Ringlet, but his kin made sure Teaser knew he was not welcome. The snubs and ostracism from those he once called family hurt most. Those wounds would never truly heal. This morning, most of his pain remained from the beating he received when they burst into his chamber last night. He'd taken it, not crying out or fighting back. He would heal slowly.

He turned his head to look back when they passed the halfway point to the opposite shore. No one was there, but glittering red eyes twinkling like burning stars were fixed on them until, like the sky above, they fizzled out one pair at a time. They smelled a fight, one that was a long time coming, but Reds always hungered for a fight. Teaser shivered at the thought of the blood that could be spilled before this journey ended.

Ari's whisper startled him. "You'd tell me if something was wrong, wouldn't you?"

He didn't need to force a smile as he looked down at the face he'd been watching change from boy into man. He was sitting on a crate, tall and still, watching the shore approach. "I tell you all you need to know."

"That's not an answer to my question," Ari said, still staring ahead.

"But it is the answer you received." Teaser stretched his back until it cracked as another vertebra returned to its rightful place.

"Humans," Carnelian said from the prow of the ferry. He turned to look at Ari with a grin turning his face into a razor's edge. His fingers gripped the hilt of the long knife at his side. "Maybe they do not want us to pass?"

Ari stood. "They just want to get paid."

Mandrake, sitting as far away from them as he could, grunted.

Teaser rolled his shoulders back and studied his traveling companions. Like the men they were discussing, they were young enough to not remember this many Goblins crossing the river.

"Put your knives away," he said. "They are as curious about us as we are about them. Besides, we are a royal party. Act royal."

As expected, Mandrake stood and loosened his cloak, allowing his silky blue tunic covered with finely embroidered patterns to glitter in the starlight. Carnelian and the other Reds stood, squaring their broad shoulders. Rhombo, Phenacite's chosen acolyte, moved to stand behind Ari, pulling back his hood to let his long hair hang loose in the breeze. Ari, Teaser noted, pulled his hood lower over his face.

"Let me do the talking," Teaser said as the ferry reached the shore.

Mandrake cleared his throat, but Ari whispered, "I suppose you've dealt with a lot of humans."

Mandrake didn't look at him, but he glared at Teaser. "Well, no, but as your principle aid, I should speak for you."

Ari nodded. "Perhaps."

Teaser turned to look at him as his mouth fell open.

“But,” Ari continued, “Teaser does have the most experience dealing with humans, even more than me. I don’t suppose we can avoid humans, so we might as well enjoy their company.”

Carnelian coughed out a laugh like air whooshing through a stone wall, then jumped off the prow and pulled the ferry to land.

Teaser decided he liked this Red.

Dianttha

“So,” said Arika, “is everybody really happy to see me?”

Dianttha rolled her eyes, took a deep breath, and then turned around. Arika sat in front of the window looking down on the city. “Of course. There have been rumors for years that you were alive, but most of us thought you were dead. I’m glad you’re here.”

“Ari, too.” Arika’s smile faded as her shoulders drooped and she lay her head on her arm. “I wish my aunt would find him.”

Dianttha pictured her own little brothers running through the garden at the end of a summer’s day. They were older now, almost old enough to be called to the city.

“I’m sure she will.” Dianttha picked up one of the many bolts of fine fabrics brought in for Arika to hide her shudder at the thought of what might happen if the Witches found Ari before the Goblins did. “Look at this one. Isn’t it lovely? It’ll make a fine dress.”

Arika lifted her head and smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Yes, but I’m hardly a lavender type of girl. It would look good on you. Why don’t you take it?”

Dianttha almost dropped the bolt. She had nothing as expensive as this. She held it up and looked in the large mirror in the corner. “I do like it,” she said, “but no. It’s not for me.”

Arika grumbled, “Why not? I have so many dresses already. Why do I need so many? I’m supposed to be learning how to do magic. When will that start? And when will I get to meet other people and learn about living in the Wildes? There’s so much to learn, Dianttha. How am I supposed to learn if I’m stuck in this tower all

the time?”

Dianttha caught the sound of footsteps heading toward the door and spoke carefully, and loudly enough to be heard. “It’s because you have so much to learn. The first thing to learn is how to be a princess.”

The door opened, and Lady Uflora entered.

Arika stood. “Oh, hello. Any word about Ari?”

Lady Uflora’s face flushed before returning to her usual pale complexion. “Not yet, my dear, but it’s time for your first lesson. Are you ready?”

“About time,” Arika muttered. “I want to learn everything. Where do we start?”

“Follow me,” Lady Uflora said. “The other girls are very excited to have you in their class.”

“Other girls?” Arika’s eyes widened. “It’s just like school, then. I won’t have to be by myself anymore.”

Dianttha looked away and picked up the book she’d been reading, unsure whether or not she should be disappointed that Arika didn’t consider her sufficient company. Lady Uflora would enjoy the comment, and was sure to tell the queen. Dianttha needed this job.

“Dianttha.” Lady Uflora nodded to her. “You’d better come, too. It won’t hurt you to have a refresher course.”

Dianttha swallowed Lady Uflora’s mocking tone and would have kept her head down if Arika hadn’t replied.

“I don’t see why. Dianttha’s the only one around here who spends any time with me or seems to care what I’m doing. She could probably use the break.” She shrugged. “Besides, what could she possibly learn in a remedial magic lesson?”

Dianttha bit the inside of her cheek to keep her face from showing the dread she felt knowing Arika was about to realize the other girls would be so much younger than she was.

“Why doesn’t Dianttha teach me the basics?” Arika asked as they made their way down the hall. “Surely, you have many more

important things to do than put up with me."

Lady Uflora laughed. "Nonsense. Lady Dianttha is your companion, not your teacher. Besides, I look forward to directing your education. We will start with the basics that most girls learn from their mothers before they arrive here. Luckily, I have a group of girls who are just beginning their formal training."

Lady Uflora opened the door to a small room filled with light from a large window. Seven little girls sat at a round table, but they stood and smiled with rosy cheeks and bright eyes when Arika entered.

"Ladies," began Lady Uflora, "this is Princess Arika. She's beginning her training with us. Come and sit by me, dear."

Dianttha quickly moved to sit in a chair next to the wall behind Arika. She folded her hands in her lap and waited. During their journey to reach the city, she'd seen Arika gaze in wonder at the carriages gliding in the air above the roads, giggle when she was allowed to pet or ride a horse, and openly scorn the dire state of the people she observed on farms and in town, calling it her duty to improve their situations. All she did, she did loudly. Dianttha expected her to ridicule Lady Uflora openly for placing her with girls so young.

Instead, Arika smiled at each of the girls as Lady Uflora introduced them and told them how glad she was for their company.

Dianttha nodded to herself. Arika had listened to her and was learning to play the princess.

AS SOON AS Dianttha closed the door to Arika's room, the princess screamed.

"This is ridiculous!" Arika stomped across the room, tossing the books Lady Uflora gave her the day before on the table in the center of the room so forcefully that it wobbled.

Dianttha rushed to stop the table from falling. “What’s ridiculous now?”

She didn’t mean to sigh as she spoke, but for three days, she’d heard the same complaint.

“Everything!” Arika waved her arms in the air. “I read the silly books she gave me last night, and then she wants me to sit in there and read them again just because the little girls don’t read well. I’m tired of it.”

Dianttha stared at the door, expecting it to burst open with Lady Uflora or the queen to chastise Arika again for being ungrateful. “Must you shout?”

Arika stared at Dianttha, her face bright pink, her breathing coming in quick pants. “You’re just like them. Do you have an original thought in your head?”

Dianttha stared back, but couldn’t think of anything to say. Suddenly, Arika flopped down on her favorite spot by the window and dropped her head on her folded arms with a sigh.

“I’m sorry, Dianttha. I can be such a worm.” Arika pulled the amulet off her neck; her face and hands returned to the same gentle green Dianttha saw when she first met the princess. Arika fondled the chain as she stared out the window. “I really am sorry. I shouldn’t take my frustration out on you. You’re only doing what you’ve been told.” She sighed and pulled the amulet over her head . “Ari usually lets me know when I’m being a worm. I miss him, but that’s no excuse. I promise I’ll be better, more grateful.”

Dianttha didn’t miss the spite Arika used when she spoke of gratitude, but she also heard a great sadness as she mentioned her brother. “I understand. I miss my family, too. But—”

“But we do what we must do.” Arika stood and placed her pointed hat on the table next to the books. “Will you help me move this out of the way? One of our private tutors would have scolded me by now and reminded me to do my daily exercises.” Arika laughed. “You know, I never realized how much they helped me collect my thoughts.”

Dianttha sat on the small stool next to the hearth as Arika stood still with her eyes closed and her arms at her side. She raised her arms, rotating them until her palms touched. With each breath, her whole body moved deliberately, shifting the empty space around her. With each new move, a pale, green light flowed out of her fingertips, then sank back to her head. And as Dianttha closed her own eyes and listened, nearly silent notes reached her ears: sweet, tinkling notes, like a far-off spring gurgling from the earth. Dianttha wondered if Arika was aware she was using magic.

"So," said Arika, leaning over the turret, "they're Goblins, they fly, and they're not little dragons?"

Lady Uflora didn't hide her heavy sigh as she closed her book with a loud snap. "They're like Goblins in looks only. Dragonflies exist to care for young dragons before they go to war."

Dianttha shifted the curtain hanging behind them to keep the sun off their backs as they sat on the top turret. This was Lady Uflora's way of allowing Arika time outside.

Arika put her hands on her hips. "War with whom?"

"Goblins, for one," snapped Lady Uflora. "They—"

"But I'm half Goblin," Arika interjected. "I'm hardly going to go to war with myself."

Dianttha's shoulders tensed. Arika reminded everyone she was half Goblin whenever she had the chance.

Lady Uflora puckered her lips and smoothed her skirt. "Of course not, but—"

"I want to go down and see them up close. Let's go, Dianttha."

Before either woman could react, Arika stepped through the door to the stairs.

Lady Uflora rushed after her, yelling, "The queen won't like this! Dragons and Dragonflies are very dangerous."

Arika's voice echoed back to them. "I'll be careful. Are you

coming, Dianttha?"

Lady Uflora put her hand to her head. "I'm getting one of my headaches." She turned to look at Dianttha on the steps behind her. "Don't just stand there, girl. Keep her out of trouble."

"Yes, Lady Uflora," Dianttha replied and hurried after Arika.

She caught up with her at the door leading out of the tower.

Arika grinned and winked. "Is she coming?"

Dianttha shook her head, resisting a smile. "It's not very nice to treat her like this. She's an important person, and very close to Queen Diviva."

Arika shrugged and continued walking through the citadel toward a small door in the wall.

Dianttha opened the door to the street. "And no, she's not coming."

Arika laughed. "Good. She's so boring! Does she ever smile? I think her face would break if she did. Is it this way? I've been studying from my window. And, I've never had a teacher think I'm so stupid. She says she's supposed to teach me magic, but she just stands there and tells me everything I do is wrong. I've noticed she doesn't like you very much. Does she like anybody?"

A laugh erupted from Dianttha; she put her hand over her mouth and shook her head. "You're terrible, Princess, and you're going to get me into a lot of trouble."

Arika turned on her heels and stopped. "Will you please stop with the princess thing? Can't anyone just be my friend?"

Dianttha looked down at the plain, pudgy face and pouty mouth of the girl whose whims could destroy her family, back at the massive wall of the tower, and then at Arika again. "Okay, but remember it was you who insisted it be so. If Lady Uflora beats me for it, I expect you to intercede."

Arika's eyes widened as a smile spread from her lips to her eyes. She wrapped her arms around Dianntha's neck in a hug. "Thank you! It's so nice just to be me and not a disappointment to everyone. We're going to be best friends. Wait, you don't think I'm

too young to be your friend, do you? I don't actually know how old you are. Oh, did I tell you about my friend Margie back home? She's very nice and almost as smart as me, but she hardly talks to anyone. I don't know how she expects to learn anything if she doesn't ask questions. You ask questions, don't you? I mean, you don't during lessons, but I can see them in your face; it's not like the faces of the girls in my class who just do whatever Lady Uflora tells them to do. I don't think they even know what a question is. My classes at home are totally different. We actually do things, and the teachers get upset if we don't ask questions. Maybe it's just a difference between here and home. By the way, why do we call this a tower when it's a citadel?"

Dianttha almost had to jog to keep up with Arika despite having the longer legs. "Will you slow down? No one's following us."

Arika stopped and turned. "Gosh, you won't really get in trouble for this, will you? I'm just so excited to see a Dragonfly and maybe a Dragon, too. Do you think we'll see a Dragon? I've hardly seen anything or anyone since I got here. Aunt Diviva keeps me locked up so tight." Arika stopped talking to roll her eyes. "If I was the suspicious type, I'd think she didn't want me to know much about my new home or magic. I mean, Lady Ulfora as a teacher, seriously? I know I don't know much of anything about magic, but I already know more than those little girls they put me with. And citadels are made to control people. Who are we controlling? Am I rambling too much?"

Dianttha didn't want to like Arika, but her honesty touched her. "No…well, yes, but it's what makes you you, and that's fine. But, maybe we don't need to walk so fast."

Arika shrugged. "Ari's so much taller than me…, well, most people are taller than me. I'm just used to walking fast to keep up. I suppose walking slower is part of the whole lady thing."

"Walk with the dignity of your station," Dianttha said as she lifted her head high and demonstrated.

Arika folded her hands in front of her like Dianttha's, but the

serenity didn't last. Her steps soon kept pace with her speech.

"That's another thing I'm very uncomfortable with. Back home… you know, it seems odd to say that, but that's how I feel. I understand that this is my true home, or the home I was born to," Arika mused. "Actually, now that I think about it, was I born here or on Earth? Aunt Diviva said my parents were in hiding, so maybe I was born there. I should find out. Oh, look!" Arika stopped and pointed to the tall gate of the Dragon House. "We're here."

Dianttha straightened her back and pursed her lips before pulling the chain hanging next to the door. It rang a little bell that echoed well beyond the gate.

"This place is huge," Arika whispered, staring up at the top of the gate's iron claws gripping the stone of the Dragon House.

"Arika," scolded Dianttha. "You're the princess."

Arika tucked her chin and stretched her spine to gain as much height as she could and closed her mouth making it form a perfect half smile. She looked up at Dianttha's face. "Yes, I am."

Dianttha nodded her approval and rang the bell again.

A man opened a small, round door next to the gate. He was out of breath. "What do you want?"

Dianttha nodded at Arika. "Princess Arika is here to inspect the Dragon House. Open the gate."

The man's eyes widened, then narrowed as they darted between them. "No one said anything about an inspection. Nothing's ready."

"All the better to see how things are done," said Arika.

Dianttha glanced down and risked a quick wink. Arika already had the authoritative—often demanding—tone of a High Coven Witch.

"I don't know," the man said. "It's dangerous if you don't know what you're doing."

Dianttha lowered her voice. "Open the gate. Princess Arika will inspect the Dragon House now. Why must I repeat myself?"

The man grimaced, but nodded. "Just give me a moment to make sure all are in their cells who should be."

“Open the gate now!” Arika demanded, stomping her foot.

“Yes, m’am—um, my lady,” the man said, closing the door. The sound of a key turning was followed by the iron claws they saw on the outside of the door shifting. Soon, the human sized door opened, and the man stood aside to let them through. “Meant no disrespect, ladies. It’s just that Dragonflies can be dangerous, and I take my duties seriously.” He locked the door behind them. “If you’ll follow me, please.”

Dianttha followed Arika into the darkness behind the gate. Her eyes squinted as they adjusted to the almost solid darkness around her, and almost bumped into Arika’s back.

Arika’s mouth hung open. “Gosh! It’s huge. Dianttha have you—?”

Dianttha cleared her throat; Arika bit her bottom lip and turned to stare straight ahead as Dianttha placed a finger on her back, nudging her forward. She remained three paces behind the princess as they followed the man with his lantern. It was all she could do to not stoop and stare at the dark walls barely lit by small lanterns lighting the way. What light they issued soon dissolved into the darkness, but it was enough to illuminate the paintings of dragons and soldiers and burning villages and Witches covering every inch of the wall. Her stomach clenched as a painting depicting a Witch posed on top of a dragon lying on its back, blood pouring from its massive claws and nostrils. The Witch waved a great staff over her head as lightning flashed from its tip to the heart of the dragon, having burst it open.

“That’s disgusting!” Arika said, pointing to the painting Dianttha was looking at. “What’s so impressive about destroying a living creature, especially when it’s so obvious the poor thing’s already dead?”

Dianttha spoke quickly, fighting her own feelings. “It’s the great Witch Cicuta defeating—”

“Even the paintings of Saint George defeating the dragon are less gruesome. I’ve seen some that are kind of gross, sure, but most are

almost merciful. These…" Arika's nose wrinkled in disgust as she shook her head.

"Different worlds, my lady. The Great Cicuta—"

"Of course," continued Arika, "but there's no reason to glory in taking something that doesn't belong to you. I mean, look at the others in the painting. Clearly, the soldiers did all the work."

Dianttha risked a quick glance at the gatekeeper. His eyes darted between Arika and the paintings.

"You see," Dianttha said loudly enough to force both of them to look at her, "the soldiers have indeed slain the dragon, but the Witches guided them in how and where to strike. Lady Cicuta, one of the greatest of all Witch leaders, is depicted here to show how well she led the army."

The gatekeeper bowed his head and then pointed to a small iron door behind him. "Yes, my lady. Shall we go on? The entrance to the training yard is here."

"Yes," Arika said with a smile. "So, a Dragonfly isn't a Goblin, and it flies?"

Dianttha nodded to the gatekeeper to answer. "Yes, lady, but Captain Peren can explain it best." He banged on the door three times. "That lets the guards know I'm opening the door."

Someone banged on the other side of the door twice in response, and the gatekeeper inserted a long, iron key into the lock. The scraping of metal on metal echoed in the hall, and a great scream followed by others—which were not as loud, but just as miserable—reached their ears. Dianttha shuddered, remembering when she'd first heard the roar of a captive Dragon that had escaped. It made the same cry just before it accepted death. To her surprise, Arika stepped away from the door and closer to her, and every muscle in the girl's body shook.

Dianttha put her hand on Arika's shoulder and whispered, "You don't have to do this."

The door opened, and light flooded the hallway. Arika took a deep breath and stepped forward.

“Thank you,” she said, but Dianttha wasn’t sure who she was thanking.

She followed Arika, stopping just long enough to hand the gatekeeper a gold coin. “Let me know if anyone comes asking for Princess Arika.”

The gatekeeper looked at the coin and smiled, then touched his forehead in reverence. “With pleasure, my lady.”

They stood on the edge of a massive training ring. Above them, a magnificent dome carved from enormous light stones filled the room with so much light it could have been mistaken for sunlight. Cages with steel doors dotted the massive walls that loomed over them. Most were closed, but a few were open. Beneath the dome and connecting the walls, stone rafters spanned the length and width of the dome. Three Dragonflies squatted on different rafters.

“They’re real,” whispered Arika. Her head followed one Dragonfly as it glided on four thin, almost translucent wings from its perch on one side of the dome to the wall next to a closed steel door. Long claws sunk into the wall as if it were butter and sniffed at the cage. “I thought you said they were dangerous.”

“They are,” answered a wide man wearing a soldier's breastplate engraved with the head of a dragon limping toward them.

His right eye stared at them as his left eye, which was entirely white except for the palest violet iris, floated in the opposite direction. Dianttha cleared her throat and glanced down at the dirt dusting the hem of Arika’s dress before looking at him again. The left side of his face was a mass of red scars and craters, while the right side was partially covered with a thick beard of the darkest brown and gray. She remembered him at once, but when she saw him last, he was young and handsome. He’d pushed her aside, taking the fire of a dragon meant for her.

“This is Princess Arika, Captain Peren,” she said when she found her voice. “She has never seen a Dragon or a Dragonfly, and wishes to learn about them.”

Peren bowed to Arika, keeping his good eye on her even though

his pale eye remained fixed on Dianttha. She did not turn away.

"If I'd known of your interest, Princess Arika, I would have prepared them," he said. "I'm afraid it's too dangerous for you to be here now. Let me secure them, and if you'll return—"

A whistle blew, and Peren ushered Arika and Dianttha back as he turned around. The largest of the Dragonflies drifted around the dome, descending closer to the ground and to them. Dianttha pulled Arika toward her, but Arika pulled away from her and pointed at the Dragonfly.

"It flies just like a dragonfly back home," she said. "How interesting! Except, they don't look anything like I expected them to."

"Lady Dianttha," muttered Peren, "will you please take Princess Arika inside?"

Dianttha stopped staring at the Dragonfly drifting toward them. Three dragon soldiers ran to stand in front of them, and Peren moved forward as a fourth soldier, a woman with a whip that glowed red and then white, came out of another door and walked toward the large Dragonfly, now standing on two feet in the center of the training ring.

Dianttha's breath caught in her throat when Arika asked, "What's that woman going to do with that whip?" She tried to push through two of the shoulders standing in front of her. "Stop her!"

Peren turned to Dianttha. "Ladies, please go back inside."

Dianttha put her hand on Arika's shoulder. As soon as she did, she heard Arika's song—calm, sweet, hopeful, innocent, and incredibly beautiful—flowing out of her. She looked at the Dragonfly standing on its rear claws, that, like the claws on its arms, were long and sharp and bit into the earth. It would not be moved easily, but the woman with the whip continued forward without emotion. She blew her whistle and slashed the whip in front of her. The Dragonfly didn't move. The woman took another step, and this time, she slashed her whip and let the tip flick within inches of the Dragonfly. The Dragonfly stood tall and screeched,

filling the air with pain and fear.

“Stop!”

Arika launched herself forward. The soldiers reached for her, but wouldn’t touch her.

“Arika, please!” Dianttha cried. Peren rushed to block her way and reached out as if to grab her.

Dianttha yelled, “No, captain!”

He froze as Arika continued forward. The woman with the whip took a step back and bowed her head at Arika. The Dragonfly took a step forward, only to retreat again as the woman raised her fist that was clenched around the whip.

“Stand back,” Arika commanded the woman.

Dianttha reached inside her mind to that place where she hid her magic and sent a small tendril forward, a single note meant not to protect or urge or call, but to connect with Arika to hear her song and how she used it.

Arika stood in front of the woman. “That’s not necessary. It’s afraid. Can’t you see, it just wants to see what I am.”

“Princess,” said the woman, “Dragonflies are devious.”

By now, the other two Dragonflies drifted down and landed on all fours behind their leader. They were all thin, and a dull tan color; their translucent wings clung to their backs. Gray and tan hair hung from their scalps and over their faces in filthy faces.

Arika took another step forward. “I’m Arika. I’m supposed to be in charge of all this one day, but I have to say, I don’t like what I’m seeing. You look very unhappy and hungry.” She turned her back on the Dragonflies. “Captain Peren, when was the last time they ate?”

“They won’t return to their cells,” Peren took a step forward. “They’ll be fed when they do what they’re told.”

A growl or inward scream issued from lead Dragonfly’s throat, and Peren stepped back.

Arika turned back to the Dragonfly. “That seems fair enough, but I don’t think you’re being honest with me, captain. They’re

obviously hungry. We must treat all living beings with respect."

"They're just Dragonflies," said the woman with the whip.

The lead Dragonfly screamed.

Arika turned and glared at the woman. "They're living, intelligent beings. Or are you just another human who enjoys hurting for the sake of hurting?"

The woman lowered her head and backed away.

Arika turned back to the Dragonflies. "I can't promise what will happen when I leave today, but know that I'll do what I can, and when they make me queen, you'll be free of this place."

Dianttha realized the tension and fear that filled her as she entered the Dragon House was gone. Arika's song was so low, she barely heard it despite having reached out to it, but the melody soothed and calmed her as it must have been doing to those around her, including the Dragonflies.

The lead Dragonfly stepped forward, and Peren gripped his long knife so tightly that Dianttha could see his veins bursting beneath the burned and scared skin of his hand.

Then, the Dragonfly bowed. The other two did the same, and Arika returned the gesture.

Peren murmured, "I'll be damned."

At that moment, a roar erupted from deep inside the Dragon House. The smaller Dragonflies backed away as the leader surged forward, grabbed Arika, and leaping over the soldiers. Someone threw a spear at it.

"Don't!" shouted Dianttha. "You'll hurt the princess."

The Dragonfly flew with Arika held close to its body as the largest gate on the far wall opened, and a dragon charged out of its cell so fast, Dianttha barely saw it. It shimmered in the light, seeming to change color from one moment to the next.

"Look, Dianttha! I'm flying!"

The dragon roared overhead, and more soldiers rushed into the dome. Peren pushed Dianttha through the small door she'd used to enter the training field, yelling, "I told you not to let him out!"

Dianttha started to protest, only to see the Dragonfly place Arika in Peren's arms. As it lowered Arika, the dull gray Dragonfly burned a bright green. It spread it's wings that shimmered green and blue and gold and flew away.

"Thank you," Arika called to the Dragonfly. She joined Dianttha and grinned so widely, Dianttha was sure the girl's face would burst. "That was so cool! I'd like to stay and see the dragon. Can I?"

"No," said Peren. His ugly red welts flamed beneath his rough stubble. "I'm sorry, but you've caused enough trouble for one day."

"How?" demanded Arika.

Peren's eyes widened as he trembled with rage.

"As you can see," Dianttha intervened, "today's training schedule is very tight. There is a great deal for them to do. Perhaps, the captain could inform us when a lengthier visit would be convenient."

Peren sighed. His shoulders relaxed and his breathing returned to normal. "Yes, Lady Dianttha. Perhaps in a day or two?"

"Yes, please," said Arika, her grin wide and her eyes clear. "I hope I can fly again."

Dianttha grinned at the pale green light floating around the girl's face. She thanked Peren for both of them and steered her charge toward the hall.

"We look forward to seeing you again. And don't forget I promised the Dragonflies you'd feed them well today," Arika called over her shoulder. "Don't make me a liar."

Peren bowed and winked at Arika. A wave of calm wrapped itself around Dianttha as she followed Arika as the gatekeeper led them out.

"Oh, Aunt Divava!"

Arika ran to the queen and wrapped her arms around her neck. Dianttha held back a gasp when she heard Arika's sob, but when the

girl pulled away from her aunt, her grin spread even wider and her eyes grew rounder with excitement.

“It was absolutely fantastic! I can’t wait to go back. I never thought I’d see a real, live dragon! Well, it was sort of right there in front of me. It flew right over my head. I almost touched it before the Dragonfly lowered me into Captain Peren’s arms.” She pointed at Dianttha and rolled her eyes. “You should have heard Dianttha go on and on about how dangerous it was and that I mustn’t go without letting you know, but I asked how I’m supposed to learn anything with always being inside? And everyone there was so nice.”

“Arika,” Queen Diviva said.

“Oh, Aunt Diviva, I thought you were being too protective of me, but seeing how hard the soldiers were working, I can see you were right,” Arika continued. “I wouldn’t dream of going back without—”

Queen Diviva cupped her chin in her hand to get her attention. “Arika.”

“What?” Arika looked into the queen’s eyes in loving devotion. “Am I talking too much? I always do that, don’t I?”

“Dianttha was quite right in trying to hold you back. You must learn to listen. Dragons are very, very dangerous.” Queen Diviva kissed Arika’s forehead. “Now, allow me to speak while you catch your breath.”

Arika giggled. Dianttha closed her eyes and lowered her head. She couldn’t decide if Arika was playing the little girl, or if she was truly oblivious to the scolding faces of the watching Witches.

“I have news.” The queen clapped her hands. “Prince Ari is on his way here with a Goblin delegation to offer whatever support they can in healing Mother.” There were a few scoffs and a few laughs until the queen cleared her throat. “For which we are all grateful.”

Polite but unenthusiastic applause followed. Dianttha stared at Arika, willing her to be careful with her words even as she heard

her song increase its tempo.

“That’s wonderful, Aunt Diviva! When will he get here? How many Goblins are coming with him?” she asked. “I don’t know that I’ve seen any Goblins before. Do you know what he’ll look like?”

Dianttha shook her head just enough, she hoped, for Arika to see and understand her meaning. Queen Diviva’s smile remained, but her eyes narrowed for the faintest moment.

“I have no idea, my dear. What a funny question to ask.” Looking over Arika’s head at Lady Uflora, she added, “No doubt he’ll be as handsome as you are beautiful.”

Dianttha bit the side of her cheek and kept her eyes down as Lady Uflora agreed, but not without the faintest sneer.

“I CAN’T WAIT for you to meet my brother.” Arika was talking so fast she couldn’t sit still long enough for Dianttha to brush her hair. “I know you’re going to love him. Not in the romantic way, but in the same way that you like me. Well, you’ll probably like him more. He doesn’t talk all that much. Do you think he’s green like me? Will everybody in town be just as excited to see him as they were to see me? Ow!”

“You nearly got us both killed,” whispered Dianttha. “Now, please sit still.”

“But we weren’t killed,” Arika argued, twisting to look at Dainttha’s face. “And didn’t you like seeing the Dragonflies and the Dragon? The Dragon was beautiful, but the way the Dragonflies screeched was so annoying. I’d hate to have to talk that way. Maybe I can learn to talk that way. Ow!”

“Sorry.” Dianttha set the brush down and pulled a stool close to Arika’s. She glanced over her shoulder. Lady Uflora and the other women and girls who surrounded their new princess had not returned from the day's lessons. Leaning in close, she whispered, “If anything had happened to you, had you gotten so much as a

scratch, it wouldn't have been just me who would have been punished. I have—"

Arika took Dianttha's hand. "I know. I'm sorry, but, well, the Dragonflies were so afraid. You see, don't you, that I had to do something? And you are going to help me get back to the Dragon House soon, aren't you? I promise to be more careful next time."

Dianttha studied Arika's face: so young, so intelligent, but also so naïve. She pursed her lips, then wet them. "How much do you know about what's going on around you?"

Arika smiled and shook her head, but kept her voice at a whisper. "I know my aunt is being entirely too nice to really like me. She doesn't want me here, but she needs me. Ari and I are a threat, but she needs me to look happy. Do you really think I haven't heard all the sly remarks about Goblins or how stupid I am? Or how green I am?"

Dianttha straightened her back and stared into Arika's eyes. "You're purposefully not doing well in your classes."

Arika rolled her eyes. "I thought I was being obvious, but Lady Uflora's too full of herself to see it. I need somebody to teach me what I need to know. You can do that."

Dianttha took a deep breath. "I'm forbidden from teaching you. I'm sorry, but—"

"Forbidden!" shouted Arika.

Dianttha clenched her teeth, then went to the open door to check the receiving room. "There are ears everywhere."

As she sat back down, Arika whispered, "Sorry. I'm scared, Dianttha. I have to know what I am. Please don't pretend to be stupid like me. We both do it too well to really be stupid."

Dianttha couldn't look at Arika as her bottom lip trembled and her eyes widened. She walked to the window overlooking the city and crossed her arms over her chest. The windows of the homes glittered to brightness one by one as night creeped over them all.

Arika stood next to Dianttha and took her hand. "I will not cry. I will be in charge of myself. Jonesy and Teaser are always telling me

that no one can take yourself away from youself. Ari will be here soon, and we're stronger together than apart. I won't let anyone, even my silly old aunt, turn me into a tool. But…"

Dianttha pulled Arika's hand close to her heart and closed her eyes. The song that poured out of Arika flowed like a spring on a mountaintop. When she opened her eyes, she saw the river that spring would become, rolling down the mountain joining others until it roared into the sea.

"Our first lesson: learning to hear the many songs Mother sings."

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CHAPTER 6
DISCOVERING MAGIC: LAS VEGAS

FRANK

A lot of time, Frank felt like himself. He had more or less than since he left with Jonesy and Isabella, he'd looked more in Marcus he should have, but Frank knew better than to say anything. Isabella looked remarkably healthier than she had that morning; her hair was a little longer, and her face, while still too pale, had a hint of color. Cesar looked as he always did: as if he hadn't used a lot of magic to save himself and two other vampires.

A shiver ran up Frank's spine as he thought about how healthy they looked and immediately wished he hadn't. Cesar, sitting behind his desk, and Isabella, lounging on the couch next to Marcus, both turned to look at him.

"Nobody's getting it. There's no switch I can turn on to make…" Marcus fluttered his hand as though searching for the right words. "This thing to turn on."

"You're our best option," Cesar said, turning away from Frank with the faintest of grins.

Frank cleared his throat. "We know you don't know how to stop an attack or even save anyone like you did Issy. We just need to know the attack is coming, and Jonesy says you'll hear it. That'll give us the time we need to make sure everyone is safe."

Marcus's face tightened. Frank gripped the arms of his chair to

keep from moving to the couch to pat his back or offer some sort of comfort.

The tightness on Marcus's face relaxed just as quickly as it had formed. "You're right. I remember what I heard and saw. I'm just not sure how much of a warning I can give." He rolled his shoulders back and looked from Jonesy to Cesar. "But, I'm willing to give it a try."

Isabella smiled, showing off her teeth, and rested her head on Marcus's shoulder. "You saved my life. You can do it again."

"Not necessarily," said Jonesy. "Marcus will warn you when a spell is cast and headed toward his location, but he must be close to the vampires you seek. If Frank and the others are in position, the vampires should be able to make it to the safety net." He looked at Frank. "Is that the correct word? It seems peculiar to me, as there is no net involved."

Frank's shoulders relaxed. Despite Jonesy's weird, blue Goblin skin, his face was open and honest. His large, blue globes for eyes reflected how perplexed he was even as his thin, blue lips curved into an enormous grin. It was a friendly face.

"It covers what we've got. And you're sure Marcus'll be okay?"

"The spell does not affect humans. You were witness to that when you drove Cesar away from the university," Jonesy said before turning his attention to Cesar. "Mrs. Smith requires humans to feed the Heart of Mother. To kill them would be to her detriment. But," his eyes lowered and his smile faded, "should she discover humans helping vampires, or that there is a human with magical knowledge, she will not hesitate to kill."

Frank's heart fell into his stomach and his breath caught in his throat, but he almost jumped out of his chair when Isabella suddenly stood behind him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"I won't let anything happen to him, Frankie. I promise."

Isabella's presence so close to his neck didn't relax him. Although, her face was cool against his, which felt good as his temperature rose.

Cesar's voice floated through the air so gently, yet with so much authority. "Isabella, it's time to go to your room."

Isabella stiffened, but ever so slowly pushed away from Frank and straightened. "Do I have to?"

"Yes," Cesar said, waving his hand at Ramon, who opened the door for her.

"Gosh," she said after a long pause. "You're right. Sorry, Frank. Catch you later."

The door closed behind her, and Frank found his breath returning to normal.

"Apologies," Cesar said with an odd grin that said he'd enjoyed seeing Frank's reaction. "She's not herself yet."

Ramon stepped forward, staring at his phone. "The Peddle Bar Cart is done. They're testing it out now, but it'll need at least fourteen peddlers. It's heavy. We're still working on the van."

"Excellent. I shall ensure there are no weak seams." Jonesy stood and bowed to Cesar. "With your permission?"

Cesar nodded and said to Ramon, "Show him."

Jonesy nodded and patted Ramon's shoulder, then motioned for Marcus to follow them.

Marcus nodded to Frank. "Gotta learn what I can while I can."

Frank stood to follow, too, but Cesar asked him to stay.

"Frank," Cesar said when the door closed, "Isabella is healing. Her survival instincts—"

Frank burst out laughing. The nerves he'd felt since arriving and all the tension he'd been carrying with him evaporated. It took him three tries to stop laughing before he could speak.

"And I'm an effing food truck ringing my bell in front of her, right?"

Cesar joined in, and Frank realized it was one of the few times he'd ever heard him laugh. It was a good laugh, genuine and clearly relieved.

"True. We know how to deal with the fear our presence instills in most humans. She's healing and forgot herself for a moment," he

said. “Thanks for understanding.”

Frank stretched his shoulders. “I’m not as young as I was. Isabella seems like a good kid. I know, that’s not the right word, but you know what I mean.” He waved his hand in the air. “This is going to work, Cesar. I’ll get your people here, and you’ll keep Marcus safe.”

Cesar nodded, and Frank made his way to his room where he had the best sleep he’d had since arriving in Vegas.

FRANK LEANED back against the cool, smooth wall of the hall leading away from the Cave. The bench, despite its rigid appearance, was remarkably comfortable. Then again, he suspected Cesar would have nothing but the best in his hideout.

Jonesy and Marcus were at the far end of the hall, near the elevator that led to the hotel across the street. According to Jonesy, that was where the Shadow Magic protecting the Cave was the weakest, thus giving Marcus full access to the Song of Mother… whatever that meant. Isabella sat next to Frank. Her hair was almost as long as it was before her collision with death, but her eyes were still too pale, her face too strained. At least her arm was no longer wrapped in gauze. The palest pink fingernails now creeped almost to the edge of her finger tips.

“You okay, Frankie?” she asked.

Frank chuckled. “That’s my line. How you doing?”

She tucked her arm around his and leaned her head on his shoulder. “Sorry if I spooked you yesterday.”

Frank cleared his throat. “My fault. I should have, you know, kept my surprise in check.”

“Oh, Frankie.” Isabella reached up and turned his face toward hers. “It’s your fear for Marcus that triggered the…incident. But I won’t let anything happen to him. He saved my life. I’ve never had a human do that before.”

Frank tried to swallow, but he wasn't sure what to say.

"It's okay, Frankie." Isabella returned her head to his shoulder. "It baffles me, too."

Jonesy joined them on the bench. "Your nephew is most remarkable."

Frank shifted his gaze to Jonesy. "Really? I didn't see him do anything."

"It was wild," Isabella said sleepily.

Jonesy laughed. "He reminds me of myself when I was that young."

"Were you ever that young?" Frank asked with a smirk.

Jonesy, still laughing, said, "Even you were that young once."

"Hey!" Isabella sat up, suddenly wide awake. "Why didn't the twins know about Goblins and werewolves and magic? I mean, you're always with them."

Frank nodded. "I was wondering that, too."

"Human form only around the twins: even Eugene was instructed to never show her true self," said Jonesy. "Mrs. Smith compartmentalized the lives of the children to such a degree." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "A grave mistake on her part. They are in the Wildes now and must learn what and who they are under stressful circumstances. In her effort to protect the twins, she left them vulnerable, or perhaps it suited her purpose. And, she's never thought much of humans."

"A point we're about to take advantage of," Cesar said, suddenly standing in front of them. "Marcus, are you ready?"

Frank leaned forward and took a deep breath. "Do you have to do that?"

"Sorry, Frank," Cesar said with the faintest of smirks. "I'll put bells on my shoes."

"He is," Jonesy answered for Marcus. "In time, I can teach him more, For now, let us say—"

"I'll know if an attack is coming," Marcus interrupted. "But, I can't fix anybody or protect anyone caught in the open."

Frank clapped his hands, making everyone except Cesar jump. “That’s good enough for me. Let’s get started.”

“Excellent.” Jonesy stood and looked at Cesar. “What part do you wish me to play?”

Cesar scratched his chin, looking from Frank to Jonesy.

Jonesy’s face dropped. “I understand why you cannot fully trust me yet.”

“It’s not that,” Cesar said. “Eugene vouched for you, and your actions tell me to trust you. But, I need someone here who can fight magic. You have, after all, pointed out a weak spot.”

Jonesy pressed his hand over his great barrel of a chest and bowed low. “You honor me with your trust. You have my word that I will guard this place with all the abilities available to me.” He smiled a toothy smile. “I will not lose the faith you so generously place upon me.”

Cesar returned Jonesy’s bow. Turning back to Marcus, he added, “You should rest first. You’re no use to me out there if you’re worn out.”

“THIS SOUNDED a lot easier when you and Cesar explained it.” Marcus didn’t look at the black van parked half a block away, where Isabella waited with the engine running. “Just get them out of there, easy as one, two, three, you said.”

Neon lights flashed, ran up and down all around him, and blinked in time with the music blaring from the casino. Frank leaned against an ice cream stall, flirting with the dark-haired server and while eating his ice cream.

“Focus,” Isabella’s voice said in his ear.

Marcus tugged his cap down and headed into the casino. “You sure you’ll be able to hear me once I’m inside?”

“Best tech available, but every Werewolf and Vamp in the area can hear, too, if they decide to listen,” grumbled Isabella. “So if you

have to talk to me, talk like you're talking to someone next to you."

Marcus forced his mouth into the shape of a smile as he walked past one security guard, but he signed too loud.

"ID, please," the second security guard said with all the formality of an elephant about to step on a mouse.

Marcus pulled out the driver's license Cesar gave him and smiled the way Isabella told him to. "Everybody asks me for it," he said, adding the wink Isabella had also taught him.

The guard nodded with the slightest of grins. "Good luck, sir."

With a deep breath, Marcus crossed the invisible threshold and entered onto the casino floor. "What a casino," he said out loud and walked around the tables.

Isabella's voice whispered in his ear, "He's on the floor."

Outside, Frank smiled at the ice cream server ans he scratched his chin. "Should have taken the time to shave this morning. I itch."

"I like a scruffy man," said the server.

"If I were twenty years younger," Frank answered as he pulled a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet. "Keep the change."

"I like you kind of scruffy, too, Frankie," said Isabella.

Frank chuckled. "If you were forty years younger."

Frank walked around the blackjack tables twice and passed Marcus at a ten-dollar table before sitting down at a twenty-five dollar table. He pulled out five hundred-dollar bills from his pocket. He lost three hands and went to another table, where he won five hands before losing all his winnings on the sixth. He followed the same procedure until he'd lost all but a lone twenty-dollar bill. Finally, he took the escalator to the bar upstairs so he could look out over the casino floor from above. Marcus stood next to the bar, drinking a club soda.

Frank pulled out the twenty and waved to the bartender. "Tonic with lime and extra ice."

The bartender winked the prettiest brown eye Frank had ever seen. "Any luck?"

Frank shrugged and downed half his drink in one gulp. "Not yet,

but my luck never lets me down."

He left the pretty bartender and leaned on the railing of the balcony. Marcus joined him.

"How's your luck going?" he asked.

"Still trying to figure it all out," Marcus said, pulling his phone out of his pocket. "I found this book with a great system, but I must have missed something."

Frank laughed. "Systems are for losers. It's the authors that cash in."

He pulled out his own phone, sending a text.

Step one complete

On the way to the escalators, he heard the bartender yell, "Ow!"

Frank got off the escalator and headed to the front door. Security guards pushed a cashbox away from the gambling area as the security door opened and a tall, blond man stepped out. Even from a distance, Frank saw the man's eyes darting like a caged animal's, and something gold flashed around his neck.

"Wayne," he said, trying not to move his lips.

Wayne froze, and he stared in Frank's direction. Marcus reached him just as smoke exploded from the cashbox. Alarms blared, and bright lights filled the casino. Smoke billowed from multiple cashboxes, and security guards pulled their weapons as Wayne and two others threw heavy blankets on the closest box. Patrons and employees ran off the casino floor and out of the bar. The smoke irritated Frank's eyes and filled his mouth with a sour, acidic taste.

"Wayne!" yelled Frank.

Wayne either didn't hear him or refused to listen. He and the other three vampires pushed the smoking box into the cage, but Marcus reached the door before it closed.

"Cesar sent me," he said."We go now."

Wayne didn't move, but turned to look at Frank, who was still near the front door.

Frank shook his head. "Come on, Wayne. Do either of us look

like we could take you down?"

Marcus leaned forward and whispered, "Isabella's got the van ready to go. Here."

Marcus pulled out an earbud, and Isabella's voice shouted, "Suck it up, Wayne, I'm hungry. Get in the sun. The kid can protect you."

Wayne's eyes opened wide as he nodded. "But the take?"

"Leave it," Marcus said as he took Wayne's arm. "Crowd's thinning."

As they reached the door, Marcus took off his cap and handed it to Wayne. Before stepping out, Frank pulled sunglasses and caps for the others from the backpack Marcus tossed to him. That was when he saw an ugly Werewolf standing across the street with a sneer.

"Upton's here," he told Isabella and Marcus.

Wayne froze. "I can't. They've got a weapon—"

"We know," Marcus said, pulling Wayne's arm. Frank held his breath, stopping the other vampires as he watched Marcus's eyes grow wide and the muscles in his face tense. Marcus looked up, shook his head, and shrugged his backpack off his back. "Plan B."

He kept his grip on Wayne's arm as a booze cart that wasn't a booze cart rolled to the front of the casino, powered by fourteen men and women singing at the top of their lungs and waving mugs of beer in the air. They didn't stop or slow down as Frank pushed the other vampires to the ground in its path. Marcus opened a side panel.

"Inside," he said, "and keep your eyes closed until I tell you to open them."

As Marcus closed the panel, Frank caught sight of Wayne's eyes, frozen in fear.

All the neon lights surrounding them flashed white, blinding everyone who didn't know to close their eyes. Frank only opened his eyes when he heard Marcus call out for him.

They each jumped onto empty seats on the cart and peddled it down a side street, knocking over anyone in their way. They reached a tunnel. At its end, the black van waited with Isabella

holding the door open for them.

"Ride's over," Marcus said and pushed the panel open.

The vampires jumped out and were inside the van before he finished his sentence.

THE ROOM WASN'T AS large as Frank expected, but it was as dark as he imagined. Instead of going directly to the Cave, Isabella had driven them to a casino a few blocks away. Issy parked the van in the underground parking garage. They walked to the elevator, and instead of going up, they went down to a long hall of darkened rooms. Frank didn't know if these connected to the Cave, but he suspected not.

"Definitely not as far down as—" Marcus paused and looked at Wayne pacing back and forth between cots and desks. "The other place."

"Issy, what the hell is going on?" grumbled Wayne. "Where's Cesar? Are we prisoners?"

Isabella held her hands out at her sides and shrugged. "What do I know?"

Turning back to Marcus, who sat next to him nursing a cup of milky coffee, Frank asked, "How do you know?"

"The sound." Marcus pointed to his ears. "It's different here. Assume it is, going off what Jonesy told me."

"Great!" yelled Wayne. "Cesar's trusting a Goblin, but not me."

"Wayne," moaned Isabella. "You need to chill. You're getting everybody all worked up."

Frank scanned the faces of the three other vampires they'd rescued from the casino, plus two they'd picked up earlier that day. The plan was so simple, and it had worked remarkably well, but nobody knew what they were going to do with the vamps. Cesar hadn't said.

Frank took a deep, calming breath as he turned to the Vegas

vampire and noted the tightness of Wayne's shoulders as well as his sudden halt in front of Isabella.

"Wayne, we're all here together. We're all waiting for what comes next."

Wayne turned too fast. His eyes flashed, reflecting the overhead lights, and for the briefest moment, his long, white teeth gleamed in the light.

"No need for that," Frank said, resisting the sudden urge to run out of the room.

Marcus put his hand on Frank's shoulder. "We don't know what's going on, either."

Wayne didn't answer, but turned back to Isabella. "Is this one of Cesar's famous tests? I've proved I'm loyal! Issy, what's going on?"

In less than a breath, Isabella stood next to Frank. "He's in charge. It was his plan that got you out of that casino." She moved to Marcus's side. "And this guy can stop the sun from burning you up."

"Actually—"

"Issy, don't say anything else." Frank stood between Wayne and Marcus, unsure where the fear he'd felt a moment ago went. "I don't know if I can trust this guy. Too angry for my taste."

Frank felt himself being pushed against the wall before his eyes could register the movement. Isabella cried out, and suddenly Cesar was there, pulling Wayne away from Frank and throwing him against the opposite wall. The other vampires seemed to melt into the shadows. Ramon stood at the door, a growl on his lips and his eyes fixed on everyone all at once. Isabella clutched Frank's arm as though she were afraid.

Cesar gripped Wayne with one hand, lifting him as he pushed him harder against the wall. "This is my house now, Wayne. You'll do as you're told." He turned his head toward the others in the room. If it were possible for the other vampires to disappear entirely, they would have. Frank would have, too. His eyes practically glowed red with rage and pierced through everyone, but

then they landed on Frank and Isabella. “You alright, Frank?”

“I’m fine,” Frank said, patting Isabella’s hand. “No harm done.”

Cesar turned back to Wayne. “Issy, take everybody else back to the Cave. Wayne and I need to talk.”

Grateful for the dismissal, Frank had to tug Issy’s arm to get her to move. Marcus already stood at the door and slightly behind Ramon.

“Come on, Issy,” he whispered. “I’ll buy you a coffee.”

As they filed past Ramon, he barely heard Isabella whisper, “You’re going to tell me about the hair sooner or later.”

Ramon grunted and Frank shrugged, realizing the long, platinum braid was gone.

ISABELLA SMILED and waved at Jonesy standing at the end of the tunnel, staring up to search the space above him as he did every time the elevator opened and closed for a vehicle. He didn’t notice her, and that was okay. He took his duty to protect the one spot he said was magically weak seriously. Cesar didn’t want him on the streets where Mrs. Smith and the Wolves might grab him, but he trusted him to stand watch and teach Marcus what he needed to know.

Wayne also watched Jonesy, but a little too much. He stared at the Goblin with such loathing that Isabella suspected he’d attack Jonesy. So, she watched Wayne. Luckily, his attention was currently focused on the black van sliding in on the Cave’s conveyor system. Shirley, the driver on this run, waved to Isabella and grinned so wide her fangs gleamed in the penlights. Isabella was still miffed that she couldn’t do all the driving, but Shirley wanted to and Isabella knew she hadn’t fully recovered.

“You’re such a worrywart,” she said to Wayne.

“I should bring in my people,” he grumbled.

“You were taking care of that when we got you out of the

casino, were you?" Isabella snapped, but bit her lip as Wayne's face flushed with anger before he turned his eyes back to the van. "Sorry. Even Cesar needed Marcus before he could put a plan into action. No one blames you."

Before she finished speaking, Wayne was at the van's back door, opening it just as Frank's hand reached for the handle.

"Easy," said Isabella. "Frank gets fussy when we sneak up on him."

"I'm not sneaking," Wayne hissed from between clenched teeth. "Kato, Ross? You two okay?"

"We lost the take," Kato muttered, his eyes darting to Marcus and back.

"You wanted to stay there?" asked Frank.

"Focus, guys!" Shirley shouted from the front of the van.

Isabella shrugged. "Worrywarts, the lot of them."

"You say that about everybody," Marcus said, stretching his back. "I'm starving."

Frank laughed. "You're always hungry, but that's good. We need to keep up our strength. Let's go upstairs and take a proper break. And then, I need a nap."

"You've made runs three days in a row," said Isabella. "I'm not surprised you're tired. You two should get a good night's sleep."

"I can send something to your rooms," said Shirley.

"Nah," said Marcus, "but thanks."

Isabella followed them through the Cave, down a hall, and to the elevator. Marcus entered the elevator, but Isabella had only taken one step forward to follow him when Wayne ran up to her.

"No one's seen Jen. You need to go back out."

Isabella turned and poked him in his ribs. "Not now, Wayne. Marcus needs to rest."

Frank stopped the elevator doors from closing. "Know where she is?"

"She contracts out. Not sure—"

Isabella pushed herself into the elevator. "Then she'll have to

wait like the others did for our recon team to tell us where she is."

She hit the button for the Speakeasy, and the doors closed on Wayne.

"He's worried about his friend," said Marcus. "Give him a break."

Isabella turned and looked into the fresh, handsome face she was so used to seeing, but lines of fatigue had spread out from the corners of his usually bright eyes. Now they were faded, and small bags hung below them.

"No," she said, shaking her head.

Before she could explain why, Frank added, "We have to regain our strength, and it's getting harder to move around without running into Werewolves. If we go off on hunches right now, we'll fail."

"What he said," said Isabella.

She put her hand on his shoulder. Instead of warmth, a chill met her fingers. His heart beat steadily, but too slowly for a man his age. Then there was that funny little blip she usually only heard when he was overexcited or upset.

Shirley stared at them and opened her mouth to say something, but Isabella shook her head just enough for her to see. She followed them out of the elevator, and as Marcus rubbed the back of his neck, she saw the faintest hint of that green glow on his skin.

Shirley motioned to the barman, then to a table in a far corner. A waitress arrived and set a tray full of food on the table before handing Shirley a stack of messages. She shuffled through them, then stopped and handed one to Frank.

"Your policeman friend called," she said.

Frank drank the entire glass of water in front of him. "Good. That'll be the time for the next trek into the tunnels."

"Pizza," said Marcus as he picked up a piece and let a long string of cheese stretch from the pie to his mouth. "The tunnel, again?"

Frank put down his burger, and wiped his mouth. "Two bodies, one with parts that don't belong, so yes, they're going back in. He

said I could come."

Marcus finished his piece of pizza. "Step two: flush out the Wolves."

Isabella shook her head. "Luckily for you," she said to Marcus, "that isn't your job." She twisted in her chair to look behind her and muttered, "Wayne, again. I'm too hungry to deal with him right now." She bent and kissed Frank on the cheek. "Careful out there, Frankie."

She sped past Wayne, who raised a hand to stop her, but she bared her fangs and he let her pass without a word. She paused for a final look back at Marcus. The green glow was gone. He was just another tired tourist eating bar food.

"I SHOULD GO in there with you," Ramon said as he pulled the black van to the curb.

Frank sighed. "No. I want you out here in case I find Phin. You're better able to get in quickly and hold him if there's trouble."

Ramon put his hand on Frank's arm before he opened the door. "I can't promise that I can do all that and stop him from killing you."

Frank pulled the gun out of its holster. "Cesar says the drugs in these bullets will knock him out. I'm an okay shot, but it's close quarters. That will give you plenty of time to help out an old man."

Ramon nodded. "Keep your radio app on and your earpiece in so I know what's going on."

Frank nodded and slammed the door shut. He walked to the police cars and vans blocking the street next to the tunnel entrance. Only one uniformed officer stopped him on his way to the control center. Happy stood in full gear, directing those around him. He looked up and waved to Frank, but didn't smile.

"This is Lieutenant Frank Jarvis, Austin PD. He's here at my request because he knows something about the folks who might be

in there," he said to the officers gathered around him. "Anything you can share with us, Frank?"

Frank nodded and cleared his throat. "If my guy is in there, he's dangerous, but I need him alive if at all possible. He's fast. He can outrun you and take you down in a heartbeat. Don't think he can't."

"Description?" asked one officer.

"Caucasian, tall, long hair, no tattoos."

The officer was about to ask another question, but Happy cut him off. "Good enough. Let's go."

Frank put on the vest Happy offered, and they followed three teams of officers to the tunnel entrance.

"Didn't think you wanted to give more than that," Happy said so only Frank could hear.

"Thanks." Frank put in his earbud and tapped it. "You got me?"

"Yup," Ramon said.

"Stay in your teams!" yelled Happy. To Frank, he added, "Anyone I know on the other end of that?"

Frank shook his head. "Nope. He's my 'just in case'."

"Hi, Frank," said Dr. Emillio.

"A bit early for you to be here, isn't it?" Frank asked, recognizing the pathologist he'd assumed was a technician the last time he went down into the tunnels.

"My gut says there'll be more bodies, and I want to see what I can before these guys walk all over my evidence. You really need a 'just in case'?" Dr. Emillio asked with a smile.

Frank shrugged. "I hope not, but I'm not really sure my guy is here anymore, either."

"Why?" Happy and Ramon asked at the same time.

"Police finding those bodies the other day has already been in the news. They had to know we'd come back," said Frank. The air cooled the further they moved into the tunnels. He turned on the flashlight on his helmet. "Nothing these folks do makes sense. They're bold, audacious to the point of recklessness, and often careless enough to go to extremes with no thought of

consequences." Frank ducked under a wooden beam placed in the tunnel. To Ramon, he added, "No offense."

After a moment of silence, Ramon said, "Can't argue with the truth."

Frank wanted to laugh, but Happy's face tightened and his eyes narrowed.

"Copy that," he said into his radio. Looking back at Frank, he said, "We've got movement."

They stood still, waiting. Frank held his breath, but no sounds filled the air, and no waves of fear fell over him.

Happy signaled for him to follow. "Three kids: beaten, broken bones, starving. Sound like your guy?" Frank shook his head, and Happy nodded as he listened to something else on the radio. "Medics have them; they're taking them out on stretchers."

"Let me take a look," Dr. Emillio said before she turned left into a side tunnel.

"Are they wearing collars?" Frank quickly added, "You know, like goth kids do?"

Happy raised an eyebrow but asked the medics. "No."

"No collars," Frank repeated for Ramon.

Ramon answered, "I'll check them out anyway."

The longer they walked, the more Frank relaxed…until three bodies were found. He and Happy made their way to the crime scene. Bright light filled the tunnel, along with the stench of rotting flesh, urine, shit, mold, and rats.

Someone handed Frank a face mask, and he gladly put it on. "Air's bad down here even without that," said the technician pointing to body parts piled in the center of the ring of lights.

Frank asked, "Any news on the kids?"

Happy came to stand next to him. "Just like the bodies the other day, but so far, we've found parts of three bodies. Let me show you something."

Frank followed Happy around the macabre scene, and just beyond the body parts was another painting of a Wolf's head.

“Just like the other one,” said Happy.

Frank stepped closer, but Happy held him back and pointed to the pool of blood in front of the painting; so red it had to be fresh.

“Wait here,” said Happy. “I mean it, Frank.”

Frank nodded. He wanted to follow, but he respected his old friend too much. Instead, he studied the painting of the Wolf. This one was different. It still had the intense eyes of a Werewolf, glowing in the reflection of his flashlight, and blood still painted its fangs and covered its muzzle. It had the same blond and gray fur. However, in the fur around its head, fine lines wove in and out to form vines with leaves.

“Eugene,” muttered Frank.

Ramon almost shouted through the earpiece. “She’s there?”

Frank said no even as he took his phone out to take a picture, but gunshots fired from the end of the tunnel. Then came shouts and the unmistakable sound of growling and barking.

“Frank!” Ramon yelled in his ear.

“Hold on,” Frank said. He turned in the direction Happy had just gone, wanting to follow the officers running toward the gunshots, but he took a picture of the Wolf painting and sent it to Ramon first. “Find out if Phin could have painted that.”

“I’m coming in,” said Ramon.

“No,” muttered Frank, “I’m good.”

“Coyotes,” Emillio said when Frank caught up to her, her face grim. “And a wolf. It got away, but it took a bullet. Animal control is on the way.” She stepped forward and yelled, “I need a perimeter here until that wolf is found. It’s wounded and dangerous.” Turning back to Frank, she said, “That scared the shit out of me. You should go. Happy’ll be back soon, and he’ll probably order you out of here anyway.”

“You’re right,” muttered Frank. “You sure you’re okay?”

Emillio nodded. “I’ll be better when I can get out here.”

Frank walked as quickly as he could toward the tunnel entrance. As he stepped into the sunlight, he pulled out his phone to pretend

he was talking to someone. “You get all that?”

“I think I know where he’ll go. Get to the van.”

As soon as Frank stepped beyond the police barricade, Ramon pulled up, and they sped away.

The first turn Ramon took pushed Frank into the door before he had a chance to fasten his seat belt. “I know we need to hurry, but—”

Ramon swerved around a group of tourists loading a taxi with too many suitcases. “There was this place,” he said, slamming the brakes, banging on the horn, and hitting the gas to pass by a party bus at a traffic light. “I only went there a few times, but Wolves used to hang out there. There’s an entrance to the tunnels just behind it. Humans didn’t use it.”

“Sounds promising,” said Frank. Ramon shrugged and turned, forcing Frank to grab the handgrip to keep from falling out of his seat. “We can’t handle a bunch of them ourselves, can we?”

Ramon skidded to a stop behind a moving truck exiting the highway, then jumped the curve to turn right. “No, but Mrs. Smith doesn’t sound like the kind of boss who wants her folks having fun. And we had some fun in that old place.”

Frank rubbed his right shoulder. “From what Jonesy said, they don’t have the will to have fun with those collars on.”

Ramon slowed the van and turned onto a broken road under the interstate. Potholes and ruts bounced Frank up and down, so he tightened his fingers around the handgrip.

Storage buildings and warehouses sat on both sides of the road. Ten and twelve-foot chain-link fences topped by barbed wire surrounded most of them. Ramon turned down another road with just as many potholes, and slowed as they approached a low, concrete building newly painted with bright white, but the blue trim was faded and chipped. It sat in the middle of a lot surrounded by a gravel parking lot. Only two cars and a few motorcycles were parked near it, baking in the sun. Behind the building, the land dipped to a drainage ditch that fed into a culvert under the

interstate.

“Can you park close enough to the entrance to make it in?” Frank asked.

Ramon slowed as they drove past the bar. “Close enough.”

Frank scratched his chin, then pulled out the gun with the tranquilizer bullets and switched off the safety.

Ramon turned off the engine and pulled on a wide-brimmed hat. “Those things better work fast. From what I’ve learned about Phineas, you won’t get a second shot.”

Within the culvert, the roar of the cars and trucks above them rattled Frank’s ears until his fillings hummed, and he wondered if it was anything like the hum Marcus heard. He suddenly felt guilty for telling Marcus to ignore the ringing in his ears.

Ramon stopped and pointed to two storm tunnels just tall enough to walk under. He closed his eyes and twisted his head right then left.

“This way,” he said as he stepped into the tunnel on the right. “Cops are still at the other site. I don’t hear anyone new. I think we made it before animal control.”

Frank shook his head. “Can you hear the Wolf?”

Ramon nodded. “Maybe.”

They hadn’t walked far before Ramon stopped and raised his hand.

“Get ready,” he whispered.

Frank aimed in the direction Ramon pointed his flashlight and heard a whimper. Another followed, only this time, closer. Frank was about to ask Ramon how much longer before the Wolf was in range, when the whimper turned into a soft growl. The hairs on the back of Frank’s neck stood up. He hadn’t even been this afraid when Wayne attacked him.

In front of them, two eyes glowed red just outside the flashlight’s beam. Sniffing followed a louder growl, and then Frank made out the figure of a Wolf. He took a deep breath, biting back the sudden urge to run. The Wolf inched closer, but Frank saw the

Wolf limp, favoring a back paw.

"We're here to help," whispered Ramon.

Frank took his eyes off the Wolf to look at him. It was Ramon's voice, but it was so soft, so compelling Frank had to make sure it was really him.

But turning his head was a mistake. The Wolf sprung at them arching left. Frank took the shot, and by the time the echo died down, the Wolf lay on its side, panting.

Ramon pulled a blanket out of his backpack and set it down beside the Wolf. As they lifted the Wolf onto the blanket, a voice in the tunnels echoed towards them.

"I think it came from this direction."

Ramon tossed the keys to Frank. "Get the back of the van open; I'll carry him. Walk out, don't run. We don't want to draw more attention to ourselves."

As Frank unlocked the van, he glanced once at the back door of the bar. Someone was leaning against it, smoking a cigarette. When he saw Frank notice him, he put out his cigarette and went inside.

Before Frank turn back to the tunnels, Ramon leaped inside the van and settled the Wolf wrapped in the blanket on the floor, then held out his hand for the keys. "I'll drive. Hang on to him. It'll be a rough ride."

Frank hesitated.

"He's asleep," said Ramon. "He won't bite…much."

Frank closed the back doors. "Someone from the bar was watching."

"We've got the only Wolf around here. There are plenty of drugs being served up in this area, though. No one will talk about a black van parked next to the culvert." Ramon started the engine. "Hang on."

There was little for Frank to hang on to except the holes where hooks usually secured freight. The Wolf slid toward him on another turn and whimpered. Its one visible eye stared at Frank with such longing that Frank didn't realize he was holding its head until he

was doing it.

"You're going to be okay. We'll figure out how to get that collar off."

As Frank spoke, he studied the enormous Wolf with a coat that was such a rich, dark brown that it could have been black. The collar was made with multiple strands of wooden beads and a single black stone with so many facets it glimmered. Next to the stone, the Wolf's eyes were dull, lifeless, and so sorrowful.

Frank felt a lump form in his throat as he pulled the blanket over the collar to hide it and whispered, "Ramon, this is Happy."

ISABELLA

Dust drifted down from the fluorescent lights hanging from the ceiling. Frank sneezed.

"Bless you," said Isabella, making him jump.

"Will you stop sneaking up on me?" muttered Frank.

"Sorry," said Isabella, trying to sound sincere. Realizing she didn't, she shrugged. "We're under the street here."

Frank hooked his arm, and Isabella put her hand on his elbow. "Glad to see you're doing better, pussycat."

"So much better," she said. "Too bad you smell so good—makes me hungry."

Frank furrowed his brow as he looked down at her. She winked and blew him a kiss.

"You're a gas," he said, winking back.

Cesar stood next to Marcus in front of a steel door that looked like it belonged in a bank's vault. Its bright polished steel stood in brilliant contrast to the patchy walls and the chipped tile floor.

Wayne paced back and forth with his hands behind his back. "I can't believe you didn't tell me about any of this."

"You didn't need to know," replied Cesar. "You up for this, Frank?"

Isabella whistled as she ran her hand along the cold steel of the

door. “The old casino’s vault.”

Cesar nodded. “I’ve made a few upgrades to what was here.”

Wayne stopped pacing. “I still don’t know why you didn’t kill the Wolf.”

With a sternness Isabella hadn’t ever heard him use before, Frank snapped, “That’s enough, Wayne.”

Isabella winked at Frank and stroked Wayne’s arm. “Loosen up. You’ll make yourself dead if you don’t.”

Wayne’s jaw relaxed as he studied Isabella’s face, then he let his shoulders droop and put his hands in his pockets. “Sorry, Cesar, Frank.”

Cesar tapped in a code for the door. “From now on, we need everyone working together, including the Werewolves.” Looking at Marcus, he added, “I’m hoping that if you can hear an attack coming, you’ll also be able to tell if that collar is sending our location to Mrs. Smith.”

Frank studied Marcus’ face. “You sure you want to do this? He scared the sh-crap out of me in the tunnels. He’s hurt and confused.”

Marcus shook his head. “I didn’t want to do any of this, but if I can help…” He closed his eyes, let out a long, slow breath and pulled his shoulders back. “I don’t really know what I’m hearing when I hear it, but I’ll try. Besides, I like Happy.”

Cesar spun the wheel on the door to open it. They all took a step back.

Wayne looked at Marcus. “So, you’re a Wizard?”

“No,” said Marcus.

Isabella grabbed Wayne and pulled him back. “Of course he is. Now, give him some space.”

There was a soft click and the whisper of air whooshing as the door opened revealing a second door, this one made of smooth, steel bars.

“Jinkies,” Isabella said, staring at the Wolf curled up against the back wall of the cell.

“He’s lost a lot of blood,” said Wayne.

“He’s not moving,” said Cesar. “He’s exactly where I left him two hours ago.”

Frank cleared his throat. “The man, I know. How dangerous is Happy the Wolf?”

Cesar shrugged. “You and Ramon brought him in.”

“Why is there blood on the floor?” asked Marcus.

“Bullet in the hindquarters,” said Frank. “The officers in the tunnels were good shots.”

Marcus cringed. “I thought Werewolves healed fast? It doesn’t look like he is.”

“I assume it’s the collar,” muttered Cesar. “If he could change, he’d heal and we could help him.”

Frank grunted, “Magic.”

“Magic,” Wayne spat. “Werewolves don’t use magic to change. It’s what they are.”

Isabella put her hand on the gate. “No Wolf I know would lie around in a cage, even with a bullet in him.”

Cesar tapped in a code on another keypad. The gate clicked. “Stay behind us,” he said to Frank and Marcus. “There’s no telling what he’ll do. Issy, Wayne, either side of me. I’m in front.” Cesar paused and looked at Marcus. “Picking up anything?”

Marcus closed his eyes and took in a deep breath, but shook his head. “Jonesy said the magic shielding the place affects the tones of the song or mother or something like that.”

“We’ve got to figure out how to get that collar off.”

Cesar stepped into the cell, and the Wolf lifted his head. His fangs gleamed under the overhead lights. A long growl issued from his mouth.

“Easy does it,” Isabella said before nodding to Wayne, amazed at the amount of pity she saw in his eyes.

“You know me, Happy,” said Frank. “The other guy that was with me when we found you in the tunnel isn’t here. He’s okay, just a little sore after our little run-in.”

Cesar took another step toward the Wolf. Its eyes left Frank to stare at Cesar. Lifting himself up onto his front paws, he tried to stand, but his back right paw slipped, making him fall. He growled again.

"Keep talking to him," Cesar said to Frank.

"You're not the only Werewolf I know," said Frank, "but I've never seen either of them in their Wolf form. At least, I don't think I have. The twins are kind of weird, but—"

The Wolf stopped growling and whined. He licked his hind leg, then looked back at Frank.

"You know the twins?" asked Frank. "Phineas and Eugene?"

The Wolf barked once, but when Isabella stepped closer, he turned and growled at her.

"I'm going to take that as a yes." Frank sat on the cot next to the wall. "Mrs. Smith took Phineas. Have you seen him?"

The Wolf tried to stand again, but only slid a foot in Frank's direction before stopping and whining again.

Cesar stepped between the Wolf and Frank. "Keep talking, Frank."

"We want to get him back, but first we have to figure out how to get that collar off of you. That's how we'll beat Mrs. Smith."

Isabella and Wayne each took a step forward and stood over the Wolf on either side of him. The Wolf growled and leaned forward.

Marcus sat on the ground across from Frank. "It's very quiet here."

"You talking about that ringing in your ears or something else?" Isabella asked without taking her eyes off the Wolf.

The Wolf turned his head left, then right and growled so loudly that it bounced off the concrete walls before he lurched forward. Isabella and Wayne both leaped on top of the Wolf, grabbing him around the torso as Cesar pushed Frank out of the cell, but Marcus didn't move. Isabella turned to grab him, but realized the Wolf's head was in Marcus's lap and Marcus had his hands on the Wolf's head. Wayne's body next to hers tensed, his teeth glinted wet and

white. He was ready to spring.

Isabella and Frank shouted, “Marcus!”

“Let him go!” Cesar added.

Isabella blinked. Emanating from Marcus was the same green light she’d seen when he had his vision back in the Cave. She lifted her hand to stop Cesar, but at that moment, Marcus stood. Wayne grabbed him, and in a flash, they were outside and the gate closed. They all stared at the collar in Marcus’s hand.

“Holy Malony,” whispered Isabella. “You did it.”

The Wolf howled, growled, then whimpered as his body squirmed and twisted on the floor.

“He’s changing,” whispered Cesar. “Wayne, get the first aid kit.”

Isabella didn’t look away from the Wolf, but heard Wayne running behind her to the white box sitting on the floor next to the keypad.

Neither Frank nor Marcus moved as the Wolf twisted, rolled into a ball, straightened as human legs replaced his Wolf's legs and arms. Happy curled his body into a ball, wrapping his arms around his knees as skin replaced fur.

Isabella took Marcus’s hand. “You’ve never seen Eugene or Phineas change, have you?”

Marcus shook his head, his mouth grim, his eyes wide as the growling turned into a pained scream. Cesar pulled off his jacket and pressed it to the open wound on Happy’s thigh, while ordering Wayne to get the morphine. As Wayne pulled a full syringe from a small, black pouch, Frank produced bandages and raced to Happy’s side, applying pressure as Happy flailed, trying to get out of the steel grip of Cesar’s arms. Wayne rushed over and plunged the syringe into his thigh.

Isabella didn’t let go of Marcus’s hand; it shifted from cold to warm and then hot before settling back to where it should be. She took her eyes off of Happy as the pale green light floating around Marcus faded. As the light faded, she felt his pulse slow; she heard that funny little blip, before it settled to normal and Marcus

slumped forward, grabbing one of the steel bars for support. Isabella held him up by his arms.

"I gotcha, sweetie," she whispered to him.

Marcus pulled himself upright, swallowing hard. "I'm okay. Thanks."

He patted her hand before pushing his way into the cell to help. Happy had stopped screaming, and his eyes widened as his breathing slowed from short, shallow bursts to long, deep breaths.

"You're safe, Happy," said Frank. "Marcus got the collar off."

Isabella squinted, staring hard at Marcus, but the green cloud didn't reappear.

Happy shifted his gaze to Marcus and croaked, "Frank…sorry. Trap."

A final moan escaped him as his eyes closed as he drifted to sleep.

Wayne picked up something off the floor. Holding up a bullet dripping with blood, he said, "This was in him."

Cesar took the bullet. "Good. He got it out."

Frank helped lift Happy to the cot and covered him with a blanket. "He needs a doctor."

Cesar nodded and stood. "We've got one down here. Issy, would you get him?" He looked outside the cell door. "Never mind—I will. Go to your room."

Frank and Marcus both jumped in surprise at the sudden fierceness in Cesar's voice.

"I can get the doctor!" She glared at Cesar, never hating him more than she did in that moment.

Just as quickly as the hate had raged through her, it faded. Before her stood the Cesar she'd gotten close to that one time. He'd even danced with her that night. "That's wrong," she muttered to herself. "I don't hate you, Cesar." She lifted one side of her mouth in a grin so the light bounced against her fangs. "Sure thing, boss," she said, recognizing her wispy, almost sleepy voice, as the smell of blood, even werewolf blood, filled her with a hunger that ran

through her like ice down a parched throat. She wanted it, but she didn't want it.

She ran to the end of the hall and turned towards the stairs leading up, but stopped to listen.

She heard Cesar say, "It's all the blood. We'll leave Happy here and see how everybody feels after the doctor stitches him up."

"But, I thought—"

Frank interrupted Marcus. "It's one thing to know someone has no control over what they're doing, but something else to *know* someone has no control. Look at Wayne. He'd have ripped Happy apart if Cesar wasn't here to control him. No offense, Wayne."

Wayne grunted.

"Let's leave this to Cesar," said Frank. "I need to clean up, and you look really, really tired. We'll figure out what to do later."

"Leave the collar. I'll put it in the safe," said Cesar. "Wayne, you good to stay until the doctor's done?"

Wayne's voice cracked, but whether it was from pain, hunger, or pity, Isabella wasn't sure. "He could tell us what's going on."

"I know what's going on, Wayne," Cesar's voice, the soft, alluring tone that he used on healthy, young bodies, floated through the air calming Wayne.

"We should talk about—" started Marcus.

Frank interrupted Marcus again. "After we clean up," Frank said.

"Why?" asked Marcus.

Isabella laughed as Frank let out one of those are-you-kidding-me sighs of his. "We're covered in blood and locked in a building full of vampires. That's why."

"Oh, yeah. Well. But let's at least get something to eat on our way up. I'm starving."

Isabella heard their footsteps approaching, and she raced up to her room. She locked the door and went straight to the warmed blood waiting for her.

"There's a lot more to Frank than any of us ever thought."

HAPPY, although pale and shaky, no longer had that vacant look his Wolf eyes had held. Now, his dark eyes darted around the room, taking in who was who. Isabella smelled frustration, anger, resentment, and gratitude emanating from him. His heart pumped at a steady pace: healthy and strong.

Isabella leaned against the window wall, staring at the shining stills with all their pipes and instruments. So far, none of the other vamps had paid much attention to Happy, but Cesar wasn't convinced that he could be trusted alone in one of the Speakeasy's meeting rooms, so they crammed into Cesar's office, a little cramped, but secure.

Shirley brought in a tray full of food and set it on the coffee table in front of Marcus and Happy. "Marcus, you eat more than any human I know."

"Ravioli," Marcus said, picking up a bowl. "Thanks. Don't know why I'm so hungry lately. Help yourself, Happy."

Bowls of pasta, thick stews, hamburgers, vegetables of every kind, two pizzas, and a loaf of bread, still steaming and dripping with butter, were spread out in front of them. Isabella sat in the chair across from Happy. He ate slowly, sniffing the food and poking at it with his fingers before putting it in his mouth. He'd eat a bite or two of one dish, then set it aside.

"Sorry you had to go through all that," Isabella finally said. "You good now?"

Happy picked up a thick burger and nodded. "Yes, much better. Thank you, Isabella."

"Just call me Issy. Everybody does." She batted her eyelashes, and he laughed.

Wayne entered the room, followed by Cesar, and Happy put the burger down. "So you're Cesar. I've heard a lot about you—mostly from Mrs. Smith, so it was all nasty."

Cesar sat behind his desk. "Have you seen Phineas?"

Happy stared back at Cesar, but his gaze was distant, as if he was looking for something just in front of him. Happy picked up his burger and brought it to his mouth, but turned to Frank before he took a bite.

"Big guy? Long hair?"

"Yes," Marcus and Isabella said at the same time.

Marcus said, "I was there when they took him, but I haven't seen him since. I think it was Upton who led the group that nabbed him."

"He's in the High Meadow Casino." Happy ate half the burger in one bite. "Upton's a nasty piece of work and runs his crew with a cruelty that doesn't belong in a good leader." He swallowed the other half of the burger, then laughed. "Mrs. Smith is still pissed at him for taking Phineas from a public place."

"Where in the casino?" asked Cesar.

"Somewhere on the top floors. Mrs. Smith's office is on thirty-two, very secure." Happy looked up, his smile gone. "But everybody's sent to the lower level or into the tunnels."

"Eat," said Isabella, picking up a bowl of stew. "But keep talking."

"That was before the police went in to clear them out." He put his hand back on his throat and turned to Marcus. "How'd you do it?"

Marcus shrugged. "Not sure, really. Jonesy's teaching me…"

"Jonesy?" Happy stopped and stared as Jonesy changed from a blue Goblin to the man Happy knew. "Oh…you."

"He's alright," said Frank.

Happy's eyes narrowed. "You seem to know a lot more than I gave you credit for."

"You have no reason to trust me," Jonesy said, "but I hope to earn it with time."

Frank shrugged. "How did you, of all the Werewolves in Vegas, end up collared?"

Happy, shook his head. "Sucker punched. I answered a call from

Mrs. Smith about a problem at the casino. Upton was there, all chummy, sharing a beer, and the next thing I knew, I had that thing around my neck and I'm stuck in the tunnels on four legs."

Happy picked up a cup of coffee, but didn't drink it as he stared at nothing.

Marcus opened his mouth to speak, but Frank shook his head and asked, "You had to kill someone in the tunnels, didn't you?"

Happy nodded. "Never had to before—not like that. I mean, I've hunted with others, killed to survive. Hell, you and me did our tour in the sandbox, but…"

His voice trailed off before he covered his face with his hands.

"She made everyone do it," Jonesy said as quietly as he could. "It's how she knew the spell was working. Had I acted sooner on my suspicions—"

Marcus said, "You're doing what you can now. How do we get to Phineas?"

Happy sat straight and turned back to Cesar. "She's afraid you'll find him. He's locked up tight. Sorry, Marcus. I don't know how to get to him."

The mood in the room shifted from gloom to doom. Isabella shifted to sit next to Happy and rub his back.

At that moment, he sat up and smiled. "Mrs. Smith wouldn't be so afraid of you if there was no way to get him out. You have an idea?"

"One or two," Cesar said without smiling.

Happy's grin returned. "He's your key to this, isn't he?"

"One of them," agreed Cesar.

"Then let me eat. I'm starving. Soon, I'll be healthy enough to help." Happy rubbed his chin. "But first, if you don't mind, I'd like to call the wife…just to let her know I'm okay."

Frank waved and smiled at Happy. "She and the kids are fine. Cesar hired human security to watch over them. I got word to her that you're good."

"Thorough," Happy said, nodding to Cesar. He drank the rest of

his coffee in one gulp. “What do you need me to do?”

Cesar grinned the way Isabella had been waiting for. A spark hidden deep behind his eyes ignited. No more defense: it was time to strike.

Frank leaned closer to Happy. “You were supposed to kill me when I went back into the tunnels with you.”

Happy shrugged. “At the time, she thought you were just a pest and didn’t want me distracted.”

Frank nodded and waved his hand as though he were swatting a fly. “Figured.”

Cesar leaned back. “She threatened your family because you said no, didn’t she?”

Happy looked down at his plate.

Isabella playfully slapped Happy's back and laughed. “I get it!” seeing Frank and Happy looking at her as though she’d spilled coffee on them, she added, “Think about it. Happy, could you have said no before Phin got to town?”

“That’s why she wants him,” said Frank, slapping the side of his head. “I didn’t get it till now.”

“Other things have gone wrong since Phin got here,” said Happy. “Others are disobeying.”

“Good.” Cesar turned to Happy. “I’m sorry, but you need to stay down here in the Cave for now. I can’t risk you knowing too much right now.”

“Cesar!” Frank stood up, but Happy rose next to him and put his hands up as if to ward him off.

“I understand. I’d do the same. Just point me to a bed; I haven’t had a good night’s sleep in a year.”

“Follow me.” Jonesy grinned as he turned back to Cesar. “I, too, am earning the trust of our friends.”

Cesar, still leaning back in his chair, grinned wider. “Phin and Eugene are special. Control them, and the rest will fall into place.”

“But the spell isn’t working on Phin?” asked Ramon. “If he can break the spell—”

“Not break the spell, but fight it,” Cesar corrected. “His will is strong because of his connection to other Werewolves. Magic isn’t his thing. I don’t even know if he’s aware how strong he and Eugene are. Marcus broke the spell and freed Happy. He can do it again.”

Marcus sat up and shook his head. “I told you it was quiet down there. What I meant was that my ears weren’t ringing. According to Jonesy, what I think of as an annoying ringing in my ears is the magic of Mother’s Song. My ears didn’t ring in the cell, so I figured that means Mrs. Smith's spell wasn’t working because of the Shadow Magic surrounding the place.”

“Makes sense to me,” said Isabella.

Frank set down his coffee mug. “Hate to say it, but it makes sense to me, too.”

“Marcus, you already know how to break the spell,” Cesar said. “You’ll do it again.”

Marcus shook his head. “I don’t even know how I did it. I mean, if—”

Frank didn’t let him finish. “Maybe there’s somewhere else in Vegas where the Witch’s magic isn’t strong. If there is, we can draw some Werewolves there and free them.”

Marcus sat up. “You’re not listening to me. If Jonesy can’t break the spell—“

“I don’t know,” Cesar said. “This is my first time back in Vegas in years.”

Wayne leaned forward. “If being deep underground took away that magic, why couldn’t Happy change when he was in the tunnels?”

“Magic?” Ramon answered with a shrug.

Isabella craned her neck to look behind her. “Why do I always forget you’re around?”

Ramon stepped into the center of the room. “Happens a lot.” He turned to Cesar. “By now, Mrs. Smith must know Happy’s no longer under her control. He’s a risk to her.”

“Safe here, unless—”

“Unless they wanted us to find him.”

“No.” Frank got up and poured himself a cup of coffee. “She didn’t even consider that he would disobey. He could have killed me, but he ran to the back where the police were. He took that bullet so he wouldn’t kill me.”

Isabella pursed her lips and stared at him.

“Think about it,” Frank continued. “Every news agency in town reported on the bodies found down there. Those tunnels were full of journalists, sightseers, and cameras. She never suspected he’d disobey and get caught. She got careless.”

Cesar laughed. “You’re right.”

Ramon smirked.

Isabella scratched her head. “I don’t get it.”

“He’s just another pup who does what he’s told,” said Frank. “After all, who pays attention to wallflowers?”

Isabella burst out laughing as Ramon returned to his spot by the door resisting the urge to laugh.

Only Wayne didn’t laugh. “I don’t see how this helps us get Phineas out.”

“A little knowledge,” said Cesar, “can be dangerous. We know where he is. We just need to go in and get him.” Everyone began talking at once.

Cesar leaned back in his chair and templed his fingers as he waited for a lull in the arguments against breaking into the High Tower Casino. As Marcus paused, he said, “Marcus, call your sister.”

“Luna?” Frank and Marcus asked at the same time.

“I need Cobalt,” said Cesar. “Jonesy’s compromised.”

Isabella had heard about Cobalt when Marcus was talking to Frank and didn’t think she was listening. All she knew was that he was a hobgoblin living in CC’s house. How or why he was there, she didn’t know.

Marcus pulled out his phone pressing the button for Luna but shook his head as looked up at Cesar. “He won’t help.”

“Don’t ask, don't know,” Cesar said.

Marcus sighed, but before he could answer, Luna’s voice filled the room. “You and Frank okay?”

“Hey, we’re fine, and you’re on speaker. We’ve got a question for Cobalt. Will you get him?” he asked.

“Everybody’s there?”

Frank grinned and winked at Isabella. “We’re all here and all good.”

“Hi, Ramon,” Luna said with a distinct sigh.

Isabella looked at Ramon, who quickly found something to look at on the floor.

Cesar said, “We need Cobalt, Luna, and we’re in a hurry.”

“Cobalt!” yelled Luna. “I just saw him in the kitchen, he’ll be—”

Her voice cut off as a voice full of gravel grumbled over her. “What?”

“Come to the phone, please,” said Cesar.

“No!”

Isabella thought about Jonesy’s voice and how deep and earthy it was. He’d once said something about Goblins being from the earth; they sounded like it.

“Cobalt doesn’t like phones,” Luna said. “And I don’t have any candy bars on my desk.”

Ramon cleared his throat. “I told you to always keep a candy bar on hand to make him an offering for when you need him.”

“Well,” Luna moaned, “I got hungry, and I was in the middle of a paper that’s due in the morning, so I ate the last one and haven’t had time—”

Cobalt interrupted her, and it sounded like he was closer to the phone. “What do you want, Vampire?”

“We need you,” said Marcus.

“No,” Cobalt replied without letting him say anything else.

Ramon added, “We’ve got a deal for you.”

“No.”

“Will you just listen to them?” Luna hissed.

“No. I don’t leave the house; you know that.”

Cesar voice dropped in volume forcing everyone in the room to lean close to him. “CC and Eugene are in trouble.”

Cobalt didn’t reply.

“Your agreement,” Cesar continued, “includes protecting the inhabitants of the home.”

Isabella sat on the edge of the couch, leaning forward along with Marcus, Frank, and even Ramon.

“They’re in trouble, Cobalt,” Luna pleaded. “You have to help them.”

“I can’t,” Cobalt said, his voice echoing as though he were in an empty cavern. “If I leave the house, the contract voids, along with all the spells and protections. Do not ask me to choose loyalties or contracts.”

“We don’t need you to leave the house,” said Cesar.

Isabella sat up straight and her jaw dropped open. “We don’t?”

Frank’s expression mirrored Isabella’s confusion.

Cesar smiled. “I’ve got a contract only a Goblin can fulfill, and you’ve got contacts in Vegas.”

Cobalt’s voice rolled out of his throat like boulders from a cave. “What sort of contract? What kind of finder’s fee?”

CESAR STOOD a few steps above Isabella and Wayne at the entrance to the High Meadow Casino.

Marcus leaned against the window inside the black van and tapped his earpiece. “You sure this is a good idea?”

Cesar didn’t look at the van. “I like a bold plan.”

“It’s brilliant,” Isabella said, grinning so much she had to rub her cheeks to keep them from hurting. She twisted in the passenger seat to look at Marcus. “I love a shove-it-in-her-face kind of plan.”

“Calm down,” whispered Cesar. “We’re not killing anyone… tonight.”

“But chances are there’ll be a fight.” Isabella shrugged and glanced at Wayne in the back with Marcus. “No killing, Wayne.”

Wayne rolled his eyes. “I know. I don’t like being seen.”

“You’re in the van,” muttered Isabella.

Marcus whispered between clenched teeth, “We don’t even know if I’ll be able to take the collars off any of the other Werewolves.”

Isabella looked at him and smiled. “I do. You will.”

“I do, too,” said Cesar.

“You’re not listening—”

A news van pulled out of traffic and parked in front of the steps, followed by another.

“Ramon,” Cesar said, “it’s time.”

Ramon rolled down the driver’s window and tossed the stone from Happy’s collar. Cesar caught it and shook his head as he tossed it up and down in one hand; his face became that of a corporate mogul accomplished in live interviews with the press.

Isabella fought the urge to giggle at the thought of doing something not sneaky, even if she was a bit worried. She jumped out of the van and walked to the front of it to stare across the street at Jonesy, who leaned against the street sign across from Cesar. He was too tall to disappear in the gathering crowd.

Marcus called for Isabella and asked, “What if I can’t hear the next attack coming? You’re sitting ducks out here.”

Cesar laughed. “The Witch won’t try anything out here. Look around us.”

Isabella followed his gaze. A pack of brightly painted news vans had rolled up to the curb. Cameras and reporters spilled out of them, all of them trying to reach Cesar first.

“Besides,” he added, “we’ve got Jonesy as backup.”

Isabella leaned against the passenger door as a woman with a microphone rushed to stand next to Cesar, shouting to be heard over the other shouts of reporters, “Mr. De LaRosa, is it true you’re taking over the High Meadow Casino?”

“Jonesy’s too easy a mark out here. So are we,” muttered Ramon.

“Amen,” said Wayne.

“You’s guys need to relax,” said Isabella. “It’s about to get fun. Jonesy knows what he’s doing.”

Neither replied, but Marcus leaned close to the window. “Issy, do you know what Cesar’s doing?”

Isabella shielded her eyes from all the bright lights focused on Cesar, who smiled and spoke as though he was talking with dear friends. “He’s getting good at this kind of thing.”

“No one’s listening to me,” said Marcus. “I don’t know if I can warn you in time if an attack comes.”

“You will. You’re a Wizard.” Isabella reached through the window and put her hand on his shoulder. “Jonesy knows what he’s doing, too. Now, stay inside and out of sight for me, please.”

Marcus groaned. “He wouldn’t wear the earpiece.”

She shrugged and peered over the crowd to see the top of Jonesy’s head. His bright blue fedora made him hard to miss, even in a Vegas crowd. “He can hear us just fine. Stop second-guessing what you know, stop second-guessing Cesar, and stop worrying about Jonesy. I mean, look at how Cesar’s flirting with that reporter. You two should take notes. I should take notes.”

“Issy!” Marcus hissed, pointing ahead of them. “In front of that news van.”

Isabella rolled her shoulders and walked to the other side of the van.

“Upton,” said Ramon. “How can a man so ugly walk the earth?”

“I count three Wolves behind him,” Isabella said from beside the driver’s door. “What do you see, Ramon?”

“We only need one,” Marcus said.

“We know,” Isabella said with a giggle as she tapped the side of the van. “Upton’s having a conniption. Wayne, you’d better go. It’s getting crowded out there. Stay with Frank.”

Wayne slipped out the back without question. Isabella watched

him, unsure what he was going to do. Meanwhile, Ramon exited the van and walked behind it, scanning the crowd.

"I count six behind the last news van."

"Does Cesar see them?" Marcus asked, opening his door.

Isabella closed it before he could get out. "Of course he does. You think he'd still be flirting if he didn't? No wonder CC keeps her distance."

"What?" asked Marcus.

"Like you've never noticed how they look at each other," said Isabella. "Any close enough to snatch, Ramon?"

Ramon turned the handle to the van's back door, but didn't open it. "Get ready to drive."

Isabella hopped up into the driver's seat and started the engine before Marcus registered what was happening.

Isabella laughed out loud. "Upton's so pissed he can't change and fight." She turned to Marcus. "You might want to hang on to something."

"This could get messy," said Ramon. "Stand by."

"What's messy?" Marcus asked, but at that moment, the back door slammed shut.

"Go!" shouted Ramon.

Isabella whipped the van out so quickly both Marcus and Ramon had to grab hold of side handles to keep from falling onto the man already pinned beneath Ramon and growling at them. Ramon punched him, and the man stopped growling.

"We need him alive," said Isabella.

"I know," said Ramon.

"He's still breathing," Marcus reassured Isabella.

After another speedy turn, all three men fell on top of each other.

"We're here," Isabella said. "You okay, kid? You look kinda green, and not in a magical sort of way."

Ramon pushed the back door open and Marcus stood, but leaned against the side of the van.

“It was that last turn,” he muttered as he put his hand over his stomach and closed his eyes.

“We’re kind of in a hurry,” grumbled Ramon.

Isabella put a hand on Marcus’s back; his heart beat steadily, and his breathing was even. “Sorry. Next time, we’ll bring the van with the seats. You’ll ride easier if you’re strapped in.”

Marcus opened his eyes and nodded. “Let’s see if this will work.”

Isabella kept close to Marcus as Ramon lifted the unconscious man to a sitting position and kept a firm hold on him. Marcus closed his eyes; Isabella bit her thumbnail. No green light glowed around or out of Marcus.

He stepped back. “This is ridiculous! I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Easy,” said Isabella. “What’s the same and what’s different from when you got Happy’s collar off?”

Marcus stared into her eyes; the green of his eyes almost non-existent, filled with pupils. Perspiration formed at his hairline, and anger and frustration rolled off of him in waves. She ran her hand along his spine, letting her coolness seep into him.

Leaning in next to his ear, she whispered, “You can do this.”

Marcus nodded and turned to face the man. “The ringing’s different here. It’s all around me.”

“You said it was quiet in the cell with Happy,” said Isabella.

“Jonesy called it a song, but there’s no rhythm. It’s just noise.” He reached out and placed a hand on the man’s shoulder. “Happy was in pain. He wanted to change.” Isabella went back to biting her thumbnail. “When I touched him, I heard something.” Marcus put both of his hands on the collar. “His sound and the sound from the collar are different.”

Ramon chuckled. “My dad always called my music noise.”

Marcus’s shoulders drooped as he turned to look at Ramon. “Jonesy said Mother sings the Song of Life. We weave our songs with hers in order to grow.” He stood up straight and placed both hands on either side of the collar again. “It makes sense in a weird

sort of way."

"A van's coming up the ramp," said Ramon. "Act now, think later."

"Don't rush him," Isabella said, forcing her voice to remain low and slow when she wanted to snap at him. "Get ready to drive. I'll take care of these jokers."

Isabella jumped as a green cloud of light burst out of Marcus, engulfing him with the faintest cloud, as though life itself surrounded him. Marcus grunted and fell backward; Isabella almost missed catching him before he hit the floor. In his right hand was the collar.

"You did it!" Isabella cried.

The unconscious man's lower lip had begun to swell, but he opened his eyes and coughed. "Thank you."

"None of us will be free for long if we don't get going," Ramon said as he pushed the man and Marcus back into the van. "You're the better driver, Issy."

"Wait!" Marcus all but fell out of the van. Isabella growled and reached for him, but he grabbed her arm, huffing and puffing. "No. Frank's driving."

Ramon pulled a bottle of juice out of a cooler and handed it to Marcus.

"Frankie," Isabella said, relaxing her shoulders and waving them over. "Wayne's with him." She turned to see Marcus holding the bottle of juice. Its contents sloshed and rolled like a hurricane as his hand shook from fingertips to shoulder. She dashed to his side. "I gotcha, Marcus."

She took the bottle and opened it as she helped him sit on the van's bumper. Then, she held it still and watched as he took a long drink. The green light remained, floating around his head and out of his fingertips. His heartbeat was too fast, and his breaths were still staccato, too fast and too short, until that little blip in his heart rate settled down to a normal rhythm.

Wayne dashed to Isabella's side, his clothes torn and a gash on

the side of his face. He whispered so lowly that no human would hear, “They got Jonesy.”

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CHAPTER 7

DISCOVERING MAGIC: THE WILDES

EUGENE

The sun rose, scattering clouds and drying the road, but not before more than one wagon got stuck in the mud. Cannon lay in the wagon under CC's tarp. With each bump in the road, he moaned and cursed. More soldiers arrived, following in neat rows behind the wagons. Eugene, lying next to Cannon, kept her head on her paws and her eyes on the soldiers.

Swill rode up and down the ranks of the new arrivals with his lieutenants. At midday, Lucrid pushed the tarp off of Cannon.

"That's enough, old man. Time to earn your keep."

Cannon sat up, scratching his head, but grunting acceptance.

Lucrid winked at Eugene. "What about you, mutt? You going to sleep all day, too?"

Eugene sat up and yawned; she hadn't realized she'd fallen asleep.

Lucrid leaned close to CC's ear. "Those rogues anywhere nearby?"

Eugene lifted her muzzle, breathing in dust, heat, horses, the familiar men and women of the caravan, the soldiers, the Wolf Soldiers, but not the distinctive alpha from last night, but another one somewhere close.

CC shrugged and grunted, "Depends on luck."

Lucrid laughed. “So like a hag. Come on, Cannon. Get a move on.”

Cannon jumped off the wagon and made his way to his horse. "Never seen so many Wolves be so quiet before. Ain’t right. They know the Painted Wolf’s near."

Eugene followed Cannon to the front of the caravan. A soldier on horseback raced past them, and Lucrid turned his horse.

“Come on. Let’s see what he has to report.”

Swill and Owen met the rider midway down the caravan. She trotted under a wagon, but focused her ears toward the messenger.

The soldier saluted. “Goblins, sir.”

“Where?” asked Swill.

“On the North Road, making their way to the Westest Road,” he said. “A small band—a delegation, they say—on the road to visit Mother for the Alignment.”

Swill stroked his chin and looked around before catching Eugene’s eye and snarling, “Don’t like Goblins. Delegation…you sure? Soldiers, too?”

“Yes, sir, two highborn Goblins with a guard. You’ll catch them up at the crossroad.”

“That’s all I need,” muttered Swill. “Owen, get these Wolves patrolling. Too many folks going to the High Meadow.”

Owen nodded and turned his horse around as Lucrid laughed out loud.

“Seems we’ll have a merry party at the hostel. Goblins are great storytellers.”

Cannon snarled and turned away. Eugene trotted back to CC and jumped on the wagon. The Wolf Soldiers scattered as Owen and then Swill rode between them, shouting orders. Half of them pulled off their tunics, tossing them to others, and ran away from the road, changing into Wolves and disappearing among the trees.

Eugene sighed. “I want to run.”

CC’s long fingers ran down Eugene’s back. “I know,” she said, shaking her head.

“You heard the scout? Goblins.”

CC only hummed.

“I wish we could talk like we used to,” Eugene said and leaned her head against CC’s leg.

CC took a deep breath. “Me, too.” She took another breath, but this time she wheezed. “The rogues?” Eugene snarled.

“No way they’d be near this lot. It makes me sick to see what they’ve become.

CC shook her head. “Not their fault.”

Eugene sighed and lay down. “I know, but it doesn’t make me feel any better.”

THE TOWN and its hostel at the crossroads of the Great South and the Westest roads were larger than the others Eugene had seen since arriving in the Wildes. The casino stood by itself in the center of town while the hostel, square instead of circular, sat opposite it. Inside and at the center was a great hearth filled with warming or cooling stones, depending on the weather. Built into the many pillars supporting a floor of private rooms were more heating or cooling stones, as well as lighting stones. There were not enough to illuminate the great room, but they allowed humans to move easily throughout.

News of the imminent arrival of Goblins had spread; by the time Eugene walked into the hostel, every townsman and farmer who could set aside work was there. CC took her usual place on a low stool near the hearth. Eugene curled up under the stool and wrapped her tail around herself; it had already been stepped on twice. Lucrid sat at the table closest to CC with Cannon and Ebon. Swill and his lieutenants sat on benches scattered around the room. No Wolves were in the front room. Eugene wanted to look for them, but dared not leave CC, who had started to wheeze again.

Eugene had almost drifted to sleep when the front door opened

and a familiar scent rushed in on the breeze. She poked her face out from under CC's skirts and saw a Goblin standing at the open door, towering over the men and women nearby. The many voices that a moment before laughed and gabbed loudly, fell quiet. Dark blue, almost black eyes like glass beads inside a kiln scanned the room from deep inside their sockets. A long, pointed nose sniffed, and the gold rings with blue gems—shining brightly against pale blue skin—glittered and danced in the light of the lanterns. One hand rested on its hip, and the other on the hilt of a long dagger, but both were dressed with rings sporting jewels. Thin, blue lips opened as if the Goblin was about to speak, but someone pushed it out of the way.

A face as green as the summer forest with eyes like emeralds and a wide smile with sunshine and white, pointed teeth stepped into the room. He clapped his hands and spread his arms wide.

"Well met, friends!" he shouted. "Do I see a wide hearth and warm ale? This must be a fine house indeed. And isn't it a good night for a story?"

The room erupted in "hello's" and "well-met's" and those sitting around a table near the warming stones moved away, pointing the Goblins to their benches. The first Goblin, whose face was even more sour than when they first arrived, handed money to the hostel keeper.

Eugene couldn't stop wagging her tail. She resisted the urge to bark and jump as she eased out from under CC's stool and leaned close to CC's face. "It's Teaser."

CC only nodded.

Eugene stared at Teaser to get his attention, but he made no sign of recognition. Another blue Goblin, this one much taller than the first and sitting at the head of the table, met her gaze instead. His blue eyes sparkled like a sunny day on an oddly handsome face. His shoulders, while broad, were not as broad as those of other Goblins, and his square jaw and thin eyebrows appeared almost human.

Eugene sniffed. "Something's familiar about the big guy."

CC scratched her chin, nodding. "Yes, he is."

“Don’t be rude,” muttered Eugene, but then took another look. “He is a he.”

“How are we so sure?”

The odd Goblin’s mouth formed a tight line and his eyebrows furrowed until Teaser’s hand touched his shoulder; he turned away from CC and Eugene.

The corner of CC’s mouth lifted. “I think—”

“Here you go, mutt,” Lucrid said as set a plate with leftovers in front of Eugene. Her stomach growled as she looked at the plate, then back to the Goblins. “They’ll be busy for a while. Everyone knows Goblins like to tell stories, but they’ll eat first, you’ll have time to talk to them later.”

CC laughed. Eugene looked up at her and stared until the laughing stopped. CC pointed to the plate.

As Eugene’s teeth sank into the first chunk of meat, the door opened. A figure too small to be a Goblin entered and was barely noticed by anyone else. He moved through the crowd to a far corner, away from the lights, and signaled a server before tugging at his hood to ensure his face remained unseen. Eugene’s attention returned to the plate as she waited for the stories to begin.

EUGENE CIRCLED CC’S STOOL. “He’s ignoring me on purpose. I mean, look at him. Seriously? I know he knows I’m here. What’s he up to?”

CC grabbed Eugene’s head and brought her face close to hers. “Will you please be quiet? I’m trying to listen.”

Eugene dropped to the floor with a huff and turned toward the crowded room even as she pushed her head under the hem of CC’s cloak.

“Story!” yelled a young voice over the crowd of voices.

Silence fell over the room as hairs rose on Eugene's arms with the anticipation spiking through the air in the room.

“A story!” shouted another voice.

“A story as only a Goblin can tell,” Lucrid said as he stood and bowed with a floridity Eugene hadn’t seen in him before. “It’s been far too long since we’ve had such an honor.”

The room erupted in applause, and as it grew louder, Eugene moved next to Lucrid and stretched her neck to see the Goblins better.

Teaser leaped to stand on his bench and raised his hands. A hush fell over the crowd. “Indeed,” he said with that smile he always wore when he wanted to charm. He nodded toward Lucrid and Eugene. “It has been too long.”

Eugene’s tail wagged until an old foot pressed it to the floor. She turned to see CC shaking her head.

Teaser continued. “Indeed, master merchant, it’s been far too long since we walked the road with our human friends, and far too long since we’ve had the honor to share stories.”

Many in the audience applauded this. Swill, standing by the front door, glared at the Wolves near the open windows and in the doorway.

“So let us not give you just any story.”

A collective gasp waited for release. Eugene fought but lost the battle to control her tail.

“Tonight, a storyteller is among us, and not just any story teller. This story teller,” Teaser pointed to Mandrake sitting next to him and bowed. “This is one of our greatest storytellers, though still a youth, a true master with a gift, divined by our Great Mother, to tell a story. There are few among our kin who can match his skill in the telling of a tale.”

Eugene, tired of seeing only feet and legs, wove under tables until she pushed her head between two skirts sitting close to the Goblins. Teaser’s eyes gleamed, and the sour face of the blue Goblin next to him changed. His tight-lipped frown lifted, and a spark ignited in his deep blue eyes. Even his scaled cheeks flushed before turning bright blue.

“If we beg of him a story, the reward will be a night of thunderous adventure, perilous quests, and magic beyond imagination. Will you so honor us, my dear friend, Mandrake?”

Applause bounced from the ceiling to the floor and back like thunder. Mandrake rose. Silence once again blanket the crowd. Teaser jumped off his bench landing in front of Eugene. Teaser bowed low to Mandrake, who returned the gesture. Eugene stood, shifting from paw to paw. Before Teaser straightened from his bow, he winked at Eugene. She ducked back under the table, rushing to CC. As she slipped past Lucrid’s feet, CC stood, stretched her back, and nodded to Eugene, who moved to follow her when a hand reached down and touched her neck. She looked up at Lucrid as he bent low to whisper in her ear.

“You two stay close. Swill’s up to something.”

Eugene nodded before following CC. Despite leaning on Ol’Sassi’s great staff, CC slid through the crowd with ease. They were almost to the door when Mandrake’s voice broke through the room like lightning before a storm.

“Once upon a time…”

CC and Eugene stopped and turned to look at Mandrake as he stepped onto the table. Already taller than any of the humans in the room, he now towered over the crowd glimmering like a beacon. All eyes in the room fixed on his pale blue robes covered with fine gems and threads glittering in the light. Only his eyes—so dark they almost disappeared into his blue face—shone brighter than his robes. All ears focused as Mandrake's voice, hushed at first, rose and fell with the hearts and dreams of everyone in the room.

Eugene trotted after CC, but turned her head one last time to look at Mandrake as he became the only light in the room. His voice, mellow and mellifluous, wove through the air, pulling her back to him. She shook her head as CC reached for the front door and she had to run to follow her out.

“ONE UPON A TIME, when the sky bloomed gold and red, and great plains of amber filled the bellies of young and old, the first troll lifted the first mountain. Trees sprang from the earth, blanketing the forest floor with new life. Goblins dove deep into the new mountains, sending streams into rivers, and rivers into seas. Humans plowed and grew roots and leaves and grains for breads, puddings, and ales.”

As one, the crowd cheered, banging their mugs on tables. Servers rushed through the room, filling them back up to the brim. The tale of the beginnings was always a favorite.

“Mother’s Song flew through the air in the breath of birds, in the whispers of trees, in streams that meandered, in stones that remembered, and in the earth that trembled. The Wildes grew in the hearts of those who heard the Song, learned the Song, and Sang a song of their own. Witches healed with song and herb. Goblins shifted words to verse and molded ore into tools. Humans grew with skill and patience, turning grass to grain and bread, and vines to wine. Trolls sang songs of wisdom and hope, loss and fear. Magic born is magic gone. The Wildes stood strong.

“And then came fire.”

Mandrake bowed his head and placed his hand over his heart. The room grew dark until only a shimmer swam from the jewels in his gown. All lowered their heads; some sniffed as tears welled in their eyes.

“High in the sky, the eagle saw it first, and flew low, crying a warning. The raven heard the warning and flew to the towers of Goblins, Witches, and Humans. All looked to the west, to mountains so high even the giants of old did not cross, and even eagles dared not fly too close. Goblins formed stones to warm homes and hearts and light the darkness, so we thought the fire would not destroy us. Witches brewed new songs, lifting them high to see what the eagle saw. The fear they saw, they would not say, but taught humans to sing in circles to make new magics for walls that would not break. Trolls told us not to fear.

“The dragon’s arrived.” Mandrake’s voice almost whispered.

From the tip of Mandrake’s finger pointing to the north, a small spark of light grew brighter and brighter as his voice once more took up his tale. “From the North, came the great white dragon, Zoth, with diamonds and sapphires woven into his scales. Ice covered the earth wherever his wings brushed. From the South came the long-necked red dragon, Morgoth, with ribbons of gold dripping from her long fur and claws. Fire fled before Morgoth, burning all she gazed upon. From the West came the blue dragon, Torgoth, breathing death from lips of blue like saucers dripping poison into the waters.

“Humans danced in circles of fear. Goblins circled, sang their songs and danced their dances. Witches gathered all the magic and sang of fear to Mother. Mother sent her Heart to them.

Zoth battled Morgoth. Morgoth battled Torgoth. Torgoth battled Zoth. Death and fire and ice ruled the Wildes until the Witches created Norgoth, the great dragon of the Wildes.”

Mandrake lifted his head. The glinting from his robes flashed blue, then green.

“Goblins cast brilliant emeralds of greens for Norgoth’s scales. Humans wove leaves and limbs for his hearts. Trolls offered nothing. Long was Norgoth from nose to tail. Four limbs with muscles strong led to claws of diamonds. Wings spanned the forest like a shadow. Norgoth drove the dragons west and west and west until they disappeared on the top of the highest mountain.

“From the High Tower of the High Meadow, Witches watched as first fire and then ice covered the tops of the mountains that turned blue under the sun. They heard the thunder of their roars, felt the trimmers as they fell to the earth.

“And then it stopped. Norgoth defeated the dragons but remained in the mountains, guarding the Wildes from all the West could send.”

No one applauded. No one drank. All stared, wondering how far this tale all knew would go. Would he end with the Witches'

version, or another?

“The Wildes grew. The Werewolves ran through the forests, protecting Humans and Witches and Goblins from shadows that threatened. Goblins shaped more verse and covered the earth with protections and beauty. Humans cultivated, and no one went hungry. They danced and sang in their circles, creating the magic that protects. The Witches brew the magic that heals us all.

“But when a cold wind blows, fire leaps from the sky, or the earth trembles, we know it is Norgoth that protects us with the Magic we make.”

EUGENE BREATHED in deeply as the door closed behind her. The air smelled of Wolves. Many leaned into the windows of the hostel, listening to Mandrake’s story. Others hovered by buildings near the hostel with their ears trained on his voice.

“Where to?” asked Eugene. “The forest?

“Where else would the rogues be?” CC smirked.

“But—” she began when Swill stormed out of the stables, yelling at the Wolves to return to their posts. He then charged through them to reach CC and Eugene standing in the middle of the road.

“Where do you think you’re going, hag?”

Eugene pushed herself between CC and Swill and growled.

“Keep that mutt out of my way!” ordered swill, lifting his leg as though to kick her.

“Try it,” growled Eugene.

CC shrugged and pointed her staff at the Wolf Soldiers loitering near the hostel watching them. “Lots of eyes out tonight.”

Swill looked behind him and snarled, “I told you to patrol!” He turned back to CC. “You’re more trouble than you're worth, hag.”

“Not a hag,” CC said and then erupted into a coughing fit. When she stopped, she looked up into Swill’s face and asked in a voice that sounded deep and coarse. “Where’s your son tonight, captain?”

Swill turned and stomped away, barking more orders at the Wolves.

"Hey," said Eugene, trotting to keep up with CC, who'd turned to walk back into the hostel. "Where are we going? What about meeting with—?"

CC turned and leaned down until she could look into Eugene's. "Do you want everyone in the hostel to know you can talk?"

Without waiting for a response, CC pushed her way through the crowd and back to her stool at the hearth. Eugene wove between feet and legs that didn't move aside for her. Everyone still stood or sat with their full attention on Mandrake, still sparkling, glittering, lighting the room with his story.

Jumping onto the hearth, Eugene leaned close to CC's ear. "Why did you go out just to ask Swill about his son?"

"Playing a hunch." CC faced the center of the room watching Mandrake like everyone else. "You said he and Owen smelled alike."

"So?" Eugene lay down on the warm hearth.

"Seriously?" CC snorted.

It was warm on the hearth, and despite herself, Eugene stretched out as she listened to Mandrake's voice rise, fall, soften, trail away to a whisper, then explode again as dragons battled in her imagination. She watched as heads bobbed up and down along with her tail, ducking when dragons attacked and stretching to imagine the treasures they brought with them.

As a hooded figure wove through the crowd, Eugene twisted her ears, listening to his light steps move up the stairs to the private apartments. Sitting up, she breathed in sweat, anticipation, hunger, and joy. There were Goblins, and there was Teaser going upstairs. She turned her head to tell CC, but CC was already standing and pulling her hood over her head. She meandered through the crowd to the stairs. Eugene hurried to get ahead of her. The stairwell bent once before opening to a landing with three closed doors. From under each, the smell of food and warmth drifted into the hallway,

and from under one door, the smell of Goblin. She couldn't help herself, and she scratched on the door closest to them.

Teaser opened the door just enough to reveal one eye, and then he opened the door wide revealing himself without a cloak and hood, standing in front of a table surrounded by upholstered chairs. He grinned, opening his arms wide, but Eugene pounced and knocked him to the floor.

Eyes and mouth open wide, he held one hand on each side of Eugene's face. "Is it really you?"

"You lying, two-horned son of a toad," growled Eugene and stared into the wide, dark eyes of the Goblin she'd always called a friend. "You did this to me."

CC eased into the upholstered chair behind Teaser, allowing her head to sink into the cushion and close her eyes. Without opening her eyes, she said, "Take off an ear or a finger, but leave his throat whole enough that he can talk."

Eugene snarled. "You're dead to me! You sent us here, got us involved in all this…whatever this is. Tell me why I shouldn't kill you now. And where are my tattoos?"

"It wasn't me," Teaser said, straining to see CC. "Honest. I didn't want either of you involved, but when the attack came, it was all I could do to make sure you stayed together. I would have found you sooner, but I had to get to the kids first. Is that really you, Ms. Carson? I didn't make you look like that."

Eugene's teeth bit into Teaser's collar. She pulled off his cloak, dropped it, and narrowed her eyes. "The kids are here? Are they okay? Where are they? What happened? Who attacked—?"

"Get off of him, Eugene," said CC. "I want to go home."

Eugene stepped off Teaser's chest, but not before tearing a hole in his collar. She stayed at his side as he rolled to stand.

"Ms. Carson," he said, bending close to CC. "I wouldn't have known you if you weren't with Eugene, and I wasn't entirely sure you were you, Eugene. As soon as I heard about the Painted Wolf, I knew you had to be close." He stood up and scratched his head as

he looked between CC and Eugene. “I wouldn’t have known either of you if I wasn’t looking.”

“But you were looking,” said CC. “What about Cesar? Is he okay?”

Teaser shrugged and poured himself a glass of wine from the carafe on the table. “I hope so. If we’re to succeed, he needs to save the Wolves and the Vampires of Vegas.”

Eugene growled and bit his ankle. “No dancing around, Teaser. Straight answers.”

Teaser bounced on one foot as he fell to a chair. “I’m attempting to tell you what I can.”

“Not what you can tell us.” Eugene sat in front of CC. “Everything.”

“Everything, Teaser,” said CC. “Or I’ll let her rip your throat out. She may not be a Werewolf right now, but she can do it. Her Wolf is there. I’ve seen it.”

Teaser watched the wine in his glass swirl around. Eugene paced between CC and the door, keeping her eyes fixed on Teaser. At last, he looked into her eyes.

“Mrs. Smith wanted you and Phin. The plan was to capture you, which would bring Phin to Vegas. Then, she could have you both under her control.”

Eugene’s heart skipped a beat and her chest tightened. Rage and fear raced through her until CC’s hand touched her back. “Phin! Where is he? Is he alright?”

“She wanted to put a collar on you, Eugene. I see it now,” CC said. “That’s why the Vegas Werewolves looked so odd. I don’t know why I didn’t make the connection. They’re just like so many of them here.”

Teaser shook his head. “It was a connection we made too late. I have no information regarding your brother. Like you, I came here that night. The connection between worlds is broken. I have no way of obtaining information from Vegas until the Alignment.”

Eugene put her paws on CC’s lap. “You said there was something

wrong with the Wolves in Vegas. I thought…I don't really know what I thought. I should have listened to you. None of this is right." She turned, glaring and snarling at Teaser, her Werewolf growled, too, wanting to come out. "And you knew about it!"

"No, please," said Teaser. "I wouldn't let her do that to you, Eugene. We didn't know how she was controlling the Wolves until recently. We suspected, but the ones on her personal security team weren't collared, and the others stayed out of sight until you came to town." He looked at CC. "She was terrified you'd find out what she was up to. You were supposed to die in the attack. The twins would be sent to the High Meadow, and she would blame it all on the Goblins and say the Vampires were working with them. Her plan was almost perfect."

Eugene lifted her head from CC's lap. "Who's we?"

"Jonesy," Teaser said.

"Jonesy's here?" Eugene jumped to her feet, her tail wagging. "Then we can all go home."

Teaser held up his hands. "No, I'm sorry. We cannot."

Eugene growled.

"You wanted the Painted Wolf here," CC said.

Eugene looked up and found that her friend's face was lined not only with extreme age, but fatigue, worry, and fear. That, more than CC's words, fell to her gut like lead. All she could do was stare at the floor.

Teaser wollowed. "Word of the sighting has spread far and wide. The Witches are nervous, and the queen is moving up her plans."

Eugene rushed to Teaser and stood on her hind legs to growl in his face. "And whose fault is that? You took my Werewolf and my tattoos and hid them even from me. You brought us here. We didn't ask to get caught up in some magical spat. Get us home now!"

"He can't," CC said so quietly Eugene had to return to her side to make sure she had actually spoken. "If he could, he would. He cares too much for you not to."

Eugene looked at Teaser, but he was no longer looking at either

of them. His head hung low, and at that moment, he appeared as old as CC looked. But neither of her friends should have been as old as they seemed.

She walked back to Teaser's side. "I recognized the gold of Goblin magic mixed in with the green of Witch magic. There was magic to kill and magic to hide, wasn't there?"

Teaser lifted his head just enough to look her in the eye and nodded. "Mrs. Smith's been siphoning magic away from the Wildes for years, building her reserves, strengthening her position. She wants more than the High Meadow of your world. She wants both. I knew you'd die if she put a collar on you."

Eugene lay down between her two friends, crossed her front legs, and settled her muzzle on them.

CC's voice, once so strong and comforting, croaked, "Vegas is the perfect place for her with all that magic generated by people who don't even know they're making it. She must have thought she'd found heaven when she stumbled on it."

"No," Teaser interjected. "Goblins have traveled Mother's Songs since we learned to sing with her. I told her about your High Meadow."

In the ensuing silence of Teaser's confession, memories of Eugene's run down the Strip as a Werewolf not so long ago came back to her: the Vamps who collected her from her apartment to take her to Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Smith's reluctance to punish her for breaking the rules, and Teaser's suggestion of sending Eugene away.

Eugene lifted her head. "You wanted to get me away from Mrs. Smith."

Teaser nodded. "I suspected something was amiss. I did not know until later that Jonesy had similar suspicions. We were loyal to our oaths. Little did we know we also had her ire."

"In Austin," CC added, "Eugene came under the protection of the Vampire running the city: first Anthony and then Cesar."

"Yes." Teaser stood and poured a glass of wine for CC. "I thought you'd be safe there, at least until I discovered what Mrs.

Smith was doing."

CC brought cup to her lips, but didn't drink. "You said you had your oaths. Are they broken now?"

Teaser laughed. "I could not conceal anything from you even if I wished to. Jonesy and I made oaths to protect the twins. The oaths do not say who to whom we owe our allegiance. Although, the phrasing of Jonesy's oath may cause concern for some."

Eugene sat up with a huff. "Just like a Goblin to stick to the details."

"Indeed," Teaser said with a bow. "I am a Goblin; my word is my soul." His smile faded. "I thought when I made the oath, dear Mrs. Smith would honor hers, but in sending the twins here without my consent, the bonds are broken."

The crowd below erupted in applause. Eugene walked to the door and sniffed the air flowing in from underneath it. "Mandrake's finished his story. Your friends will be here soon. Hey!" She turned and jumped onto the chair next to Teaser. "That's Ari I smell down there, so he's safe with us. What about Arika?"

Teaser squirmed until finally he said, "Well, as safe as he can be for now. As soon as the twins arrived, the spells hiding their true selves dissolved. He's had some difficulty…adjusting. His cousin Mandrake does not aid him as he should, but yes, he is under my direct care for now and safe. Alas, in the confusion to get them both to safety, Arika found her way to the Witches in the High Meadow."

"But she's the daughter of a great Witch queen," CC argued.

Eugene jumped off the chair to stand in front of CC. "How do you know that?"

"I listen to the caravan crew. You should, too. They like telling stories." CC nodded to Teaser. "They'll treat her alright?"

"Like a princess," Teaser muttered before gulping down his wine.

Eugene coughed, "Oh, that's going to be a problem."

"Why?" asked CC.

"She already thinks of herself as a princess." Eugene nodded to

the door. “Someone’s coming upstairs. Before they get here, how was I able to let out my Werewolf, but then find myself stuck as a mutt again?”

Teaser straightened the goblets on the table but stopped to scratch his chin. “I do not know, but it is best you remain as you are for now. More soldiers are on their way here to observe a procession of Goblins and to seek the Painted Wolf.”

CC stood, leaning heavily on the giant staff. “We should go, Eugene.”

Teaser moved to stand in front of CC and reached for the staff, but stopped and shoved both hands in his pockets. “That is the staff of my dear friend, Ol’Sassie, is it not?”

CC nodded. “I’m sorry. She gave it to us before we left her cave.”

“She needs it not, anymore.” Teaser turned away from them to clear his throat. “She was a great teacher: the wisest of us all. Sending you in her direction must have been Jonesy’s doing. He was her pupil for many years.”

Eugene sat next to Teaser, staring up at his face, hidden in shadow by all but the keen eyes of a canine. She’d never seen him sad.

He took in a deep breath and smiled. “Keep the staff wrapped and hidden while you may. More than I know a Troll's staff when we see one. It is why I suspected you and Eugene were not what you seemed.”

Eugene heard heavy footsteps on the stairs and pushed her nose against the crack under the door even as Teaser added, “It was she who made you old for your protection and to ensure transportation. You’re a welcome sight for caravans, CC. I’m sorry, I cannot undo her spell.”

He placed each of his hands on her shoulders. Eugene’s eye widened as a gold haze shimmered off his hands and into her. “At least I can ease your pains.”

The handle of the door turned. Eugene sat still as the door

opened and in walked the tallest of the Goblins from the party below. Ari's face, so young and yet so strained, did not turn toward her.

"Teaser," he said.

Eugene did her best, but could not prevent her tail from wagging at the familiar scent.

"Mandrake and the others—" Ari looked down at Eugene. The same smile he always wore when he was happy showed through the scales and fur about his face. "Hello there, little fella."

He bent down to pet Eugene's head.

Eugene turned her head to look at Teaser, hiding a grin as he pushed CC behind Ari and and out the door. "Fella? Really?"

"Leave the old bitch alone," said Teaser. "She has fleas."

Eugene turned to retaliate, but CC looked down at her and shook her head.

"She's cute," said Ari. "There's no harm in a friendly pet."

"If you only knew," escaped Teaser's mouth which he tried to hide by turning and rolling his eyes.

Eugene barked and jumped on the table to keep Ari's attention.

"See what you've done?" grumbled Teaser.

Eugene made sure CC was out the door before allowing him to pick her up and set her outside the door. "Sorry, little friend. Maybe we'll see each other on the road tomorrow."

EUGENE DASHED down the stairs and curled up under the stool where CC had been sitting earlier. "I do not have fleas."

Despite the press of people moving around the room, thanking Mandrake for the story, buying drinks for the Goblins, begging Mandrake for more stories, and leaving for home, CC moved easily down the stairs and through the throng.

Eugene lifted her head, and yawned. "You can move around fast enough when you want to. A lot faster than some old bitch with

fleas."

"Easy, mutt." CC took a plate of bread and cheese from a server. "Lots of eyes watching."

"Damn it." Eugene scratched behind her ear. "Now I can't stop itching."

CC handed her a bit of cheese. As she ate, Eugene looked around, pointing her ears in every direction they could go.

"There's no such thing as dragons, is there, Mums?" a boyish voice asked.

"Not as good as in the old days," said an old voice. "Now, back when I were young…"

"Scouts back. Make sure none of them wandered off the road," said a lieutenant.

"Ever seen such jewels?"

"Goblins sooner rip out your guts. Keep your eyes off their finery."

"We'll keep them on edge as long as we can," a woman's voice said.

Eugene turned her head. She couldn't see the woman, but she knew that voice. Stretching her back, she leaned close to CC. "I'm going to sniff around."

"Watch your tail," said CC.

Eugene dashed under a table just before three men stood, pushing the bench behind them. She barked once, and one man threw her a bone. She picked it up and ran between feet until she was under another table. The bone didn't smell good. She dropped it and focused on the familiar woman's voice.

"You're pushing your luck."

Eugene stopped and poked her head out from under the table. Lucrid leaned back in a chair near a wall with his eyes closed, but Eugene breathed in his watchfulness. A smaller figure sat across from him with her back to her.

"We won't let them take her," said Wren's voice, so determined and hushed.

“They know nothing.” Lucrid sat up and stretched his back. “I don’t know anything anymore.”

“You’re lying.” The woman turned toward Lucrid.

“I’ve never lied to you, Wren.”

“True, but only tell convenient truths.”

Wren tossed coins on the table. As she walked past, Eugene took a long sniff. Wild woods, night walks, honesty, and pain filled her senses. Wren was not a Wolf, but she was close to them. At the last moment, Eugene caught the scent of the alpha mingled with Wren’s.

Eugene stayed under tables, but followed Wren. As she opened the door and stepped outside, Eugene checked on CC, who was still sitting on her stool with Lucrid and Swill now standing on either side of her. After taking one last look to see the door close behind Wren, Eugene snuck back to CC.

“You’ve already inspected the wagons,” said Lucrid, “but if you feel you must do so again, I only ask that you do it tonight. Time is money, and I must get to the High Meadow before the ceremonies begin.”

“We’ll make it with plenty of time to spare, Lucrid. And why not? You’ve got your lucky hag.”

Eugene walked around Swill to slide behind CC’s stool from behind.

“This grandmother has only so much luck, Captain.”

Swill looked down at CC and caught sight of Eugene, who returned his glare. “You’re running out of luck with that ugly mutt. Keep it out of my way tomorrow, hag.”

Eugene’s hackles rose. She bared her fangs at Swill, ignoring CC’s foot against her side. Then, a chorus of howls echoed out of the woods and through the hostel. Soldiers ran outside, and. Swill looked from Eugene to Lucrid.

“One more night of luck will be your last, mutt.”

He ran out of the hostel with his lieutenants.

Lucrid rubbed his hands together, frowning. "Better keep close,” he said, although Eugene wasn’t sure if meant CC or herself.

“Wren’s working with the rogues,” Eugene whispered as she circled CC twice, before pushing her cloak out of the way to slide under her stool.

“That’s where she’s been going,” muttered CC. “Interesting.”

Eugene yawned, realizing CC’s breath no longer wheezed. Teaser’s spell must be work With a comforting though, she closed her eyes and went to sleep.

EUGENE LEAPED UP, caught the ball, and landed square in front of Mandrake on his horse. He scowled down at her, turned back to Ari, and moved on.

Ari ran up to her and reached for the ball. “You should leave Mandrake alone. He doesn’t like you.”

Eugene ignored Ari and carried the ball to the rear wagon, where CC and Teaser talked as he rode his horse behind the wagon.

“I would say he dislikes all dogs. He knows no better,” Teaser said with a laugh, nudging his horse toward Ari.

Ari sniffed and quickened his steps to catch up with Eugene. “He could loosen up a bit. It’s not like we’ve got anything to do on this trip.”

Eugene jumped up on the back of the wagon and set the ball on CC’s lap with a huff. “If you ever tell anyone about this, I’ll dig up all those roses you plan to plant when we get home.”

CC put her hand on Eugene’s back and scratched the spot just under her fur that always itched. “He’s a boy, he’s bored, and he’s scared.”

Eugene leaned into CC’s side as the scratching sent a soothing tingle down her spine. “I’m scared, too, and stuck as a mutt. You’re stuck—“

“Neither of us are fourteen.” CC stopped scratching and looked into Eugene’s eyes.

Eugene spread out on her stomach, letting the wagon’s wood

cool her skin. “I know, but playing catch? I’ll never live this down.”

“We didn’t keep you up all night with our tales, did we, Grandmother?” Teaser asked, clearing his throat as Ari jogged to his side.

CC shrugged, and Ari waved for Eugene to join them. Eugene saw her reflection in his large, dark eyes. She could well have been any old mutt lying next to any old woman, but the more she stared, the brighter the light deep inside Ari’s eyes burned, smoldered, searched. He hung his head and slowed his pace to move back to the Goblins marching behind the caravan.

“Shit!” She jumped off the wagon with the ball in her mouth and ran after Ari. When she caught up to him, she dropped it at his feet and barked once.

Ari’s mouth burst into a smile, and the light burning in his eyes flared. “You’re supposed to bring the ball back to me, silly dog, not the old woman!”

He tossed the ball in the air once, twice, and on the third time, it soared just ahead of the cart that carried CC. Eugene barked and ran after it. When she returned, Ari bent down and scratched her ears.

“That’s how you do it!” As he stood and tossed the ball from one hand to another, he said, “I can’t keep calling you mutt. What is your name?”

Teaser, who’d joined CC on the back of the wagon, shouted, “Grandmother informs me that that is all the bitch will answer to.”

Eugene jogged to Teaser’s feet and nibbled his ankle. “Thin ice, Teaser.”

“Ow!” Teaser winced, then laughed. “Considering her tendency to bite, perhaps her name should be Biter or even Killer?”

Ari tossed the ball high into the air. Eugene jumped up, caught it in her mouth, and ran circles around Ari.

“She’s too nice for something like that. I’ll call her Nibbler,” Ari said with a grin. “What do you think, Nibbler?”

Eugene resisted the urge to growl, but glared at Teaser as she

dashed past him to the next wagon, where the ball had hit the ground and rolled under its wheels. Wren jumped off the back of it and grabbed the ball before Eugene could.

"Swill's riding down the caravan with his soldiers," she said, handing over the ball. "Best make yourself scarce."

Eugene nodded and ran back to the wagon, leaping up and landing next to CC as Teaser jumped off and motioned for one of the round, red Goblin guards to bring Ari's horse.

"On your horse," Teaser said, holding the stirrup for Ari.

"Do I have to?" Ari.

"Yes," said Teaser, smiling at him. "But you don't have to ride alone. Take Nibbler with you. She'll enjoy the view from your saddle."

"Seriously?" Eugene complained, but seeing the smile on Ari's face, so genuine and lonely, she sighed. As Teaser leaned down from his horse to pick her up, Eugene let out a low whine for CC. "Wren's in the wagon ahead of you."

"Interesting," CC and Teaser said in unison.

Ari gripped Eugene's sides tightly, causing her to bark to Teaser from between clenched teeth.

"She will not leap off her perch, Ari," Teaser said. "Look at her face. See how eager she is to see what and who is about her!"

The rest of the Goblin party clustered behind Ari and Teaser with Mandrake in the lead. "Must we endure the presence of the canine even while on horseback? You are our next Ringleader, Ari. Think about what message this sends to the others."

Eugene turned her head to look at Mandrake, lifted her muzzle to the same angle as his nose, and pointed her ears away from him. Ari chuckled, his belly shaking against her back.

"No greater friend to all," said CC, her voice lifting so all could hear it even though it cracked with age, "than a friend to one. No greater friend than one who embraces all."

"Loosen up, cousin," said Ari. "Dogs are noble companions in my world. Thanks for letting me borrow yours for a while,

Grandmother."

He nodded at CC and nudged his horse forward. Eugene looked back at Mandrake, whose mouth had once again tightened into a straight line. He kicked his horse to keep up with Ari.

From her place on Ari's saddle, Eugene could just see the lead wagon of the caravan. It had grown in the three days since they met the Goblins. Teaser said the closer they got to the High Meadow, the more caravans they would see, but she hadn't realized they would meet so many. The delay caused by Swill's examination of Lucrid's wagon meant they were dead last, except for the Goblins. Eugene couldn't decide if the Goblins chose to be last in the long line of wagons, or if Swill had decided that for them.

Swill and his soldiers slowed as they reached where Lucrid rode his horse and strummed his small guitar, singing a soft tune more to himself than anyone else.

Teaser pushed past Ari and Mandrake, calling out, "Master merchant, have you no jolly tune to aid us as a we while away these long, hot hours?"

Lucrid laughed. "Indeed, but I feel the need for speech will soon outweigh my need to sing." He jerked his chin forward. "Swill and his lieutenants approach."

Eugene lifted the side of her mouth as a tiny growl issued from her throat despite herself.

"Be still, Nibbler," Ari said as he scratched the top of her head.

Eugene stretched her neck as the sound of feet jogging toward them grew louder. The Goblins who made up Ari and Mandrake's guard drew almost imperceptibly closer as Swill approached. Even Teaser slowed his horse until he rode just in front of Ari. Otherwise, everyone ignored Swill even as he turned his horse around to walk beside Lucrid. The soldiers with him turned without a command and remained on the far side of the wagon, away from the Goblins. Eugene watched Owen's face and whimpered. He stared straight ahead, seeing nothing.

The driver of the wagon slumped forward until his hood covered

his face. Behind him, someone else in the wagon shifted boxes filled with something that sent the smells of flowers and meadows towards Eugene. She breathed in lilac, rose, heather, gardenias, jasmine, and then Wren and her wild woods, night walks, and alpha lover scent. Owen, Eugene noticed, never sniffed the air around him filled with the charming fragrances or the driver's sweat, the horses, or the hint of pine in the wind.

"Still got your lucky hag and her ugly mutt, I see," said Swill. "There'll be trouble if either of them gets in my way, Lucrid."

Eugene looked down when the smallest flap of canvas slipped open, and one of Wren's eyes stared up at her. Along with the sight of the eye came the scent of furs: mink, rabbit, and buck. Despite the heat, Wren must have covered herself with the furs. Useful to hide one's own scent.

"Noted," Lucrid said with the fool's grin he always wore when he spoke to Swill. "How goes your nightly jaunt with the rogues? Must be tiresome running after them every night and managing the caravan by day."

"Under control," Swill snarled. "Keep to your own business."

Eugene breathed in Swill's sweat. There was fatigue, but also fear, loathing, anger, and something else; he was sad.

Swill turned his horse. His soldiers did the same, but before he rode on to the end of the caravan, he scowled at Eugene. "Riding with a prince or not, keep out of my way, mutt."

Wren's eye disappeared under the furs and did not reappear until Swill and his horsemen were downwind of them.

EUGENE SCRATCHED the ground until she formed the perfect depression. The night was as hot as the day had been, and the overcrowded hostel was even hotter. At least outside, under the wagon near and near Lucrid's crew, the heat was bearable after the sun set and the shadows of the trees crept around them.

This spot was also perfect because she could see everyone from it. Ari and Mandrake walked out of the hostel to join their Goblin companions for a drink and a song. As future Ringleaders, they slept in private rooms upstairs made even more comfortable by cooling stones placed on the window sills so the evening breeze blew over them filling the room with a calming chill.

Wren sat across from CC in the circle formed by the caravan hands. Bart sat next to her talking about his home and family, but Wren ignored him. Ebon, to Eugene's surprise, kept his bow and quiver slung across his back and sat next to CC. Cannon sat on her other side, and only Lucrid remained inside the hostel sharing drinks with other merchants.

Cannon stood and dumped the last of his coffee on the ground. Eugene growled, but he ignored her. "Only gets more crowded the closer we get." He scowled. "Ebon, get up a tree and keep watch. And don't you go falling asleep, either: keen eyes, boy."

Ebon got up, pulled another chunk of bread off the platter in the center of their circle, and disappeared into the trees behind them.

"Where do you want me, Pops?" asked Bart.

"Getting your sleep. No falling asleep while driving tomorrow. You almost made the wagon slip this afternoon." When Bart opened his mouth to object, Cannon added, "Don't think I didn't see it. To bed with you."

Laughter and snickers followed Bart as he dragged his feet all the way to his bedding under his wagon.

"Same for the rest of you!" shouted Cannon. And then grumbling under his breath, he added to Eugene and CC, he added, "Caravans this big don't work. Mark my words. There'll be trouble before we get to the High Meadow."

Eugene closed her eyes but kept her ears alert. Soldiers walked up and down the road and into the circles of wagons on either side of it. None, however, ventured into Lucrid's circle.

Wren put her things away and sat next to CC. "Is there anything I can get you, Grandmother?"

CC downed the last of the warm beer in her mug and handed it to Wren. “No, but the mutt might like some more water.”

Eugene growled, but didn’t open her eyes.

“Cranky,” said CC. “Worn out from playing with Goblins.”

Wren giggled. “Is that what you’d call it?”

Eugene stood, stretched, and moved to stand behind CC.

“What would you call it?” CC asked.

“Spying,” Wren said without hesitation. “And she’s very good at it.”

“Takes a sneak to know one,” Eugene whispered in her ear.

“Almost as good as you,” CC said to Wren.

Eugene tilted her head as a deep blush spread across Wren’s cheeks. “Not good enough, it seems.”

“Meeting rogues is dangerous,” CC said so quietly Eugene had to lean in close to make certain she’d heard.

Wren put her hand on top of CC’s hand. “Not as dangerous as you going into the High Meadow.”

Eugene sighed and whispered into CC’s ear, “She won’t understand.”

CC turned and looked into Eugene’s eyes. “Do we understand? As far as I can tell, we’re damned if we do and damned if we don’t.”

Eugene nodded. “We’re stuck either way. I can’t leave them knowing they’re slaves, but I can’t stay here. It’s not home.”

“I know.” CC looked back to Wren. “We both know what we have to do, but we want to go home.”

Wren’s eyebrows arched as she looked from CC’s face to Eugene’s. “I don’t know how you speak to each other, but I understand wanting to go home. But, we need the Painted Wolf. She’s our salvation.” Eugene walked around CC and put her head on Wren’s shoulder. “Oh, I didn’t—I mean, this is so—I don't know what to think about this. You’re the Painted Wolf. You’re supposed to save us.”

CC coughed, and all three of them looked up as Cannon walked up to them. “You can make friends withthe grandmother tomorrow,

Wren. Get to bed. We've a long way to go tomorrow."

"Yes, sir." Before leaving them, Wren looked down at Eugene. "We all do what we need to."

Eugene put her head on CC's lap. "This so sucks!"

CC nodded and closed her eyes.

Eugene returned to her spot under the wagon and kept her eyes fixed on Wren as she crawled under her wagon and shifted her blankets.

Lucrid walked into the center of the wagons and called for Cannon. Together, they returned to the hostel.

Eugene sighed heavily and returned to CC's side. "I have to at least try to help them."

"Yes, we do." CC stood and shook the dust from her cloak. "Follow Lucrid and Cannon. See what they're up to. Then, find Teaser. We'll need a distraction if we're going to get away from the caravan without being noticed."

Eugene barked her approval and ran after Lucrid, slipping inside the hostel just before Cannon closed the door. They headed to a table on the far side of the common room where Teaser sat drinking from a large goblet. Eugene wove between and under tables, around soldiers sitting by the hearth, between merchants and their crews crowded around tables eating and drinking, and reached the table just before Lucrid and Cannon did.

Teaser looked down at her and winked.

"Not a word." she muttered and dashed under the table just as Lucrid sat across from Teaser. "But we've got to go."

Lucrid introduced Cannon as a server brought a tray with goblets and a bottle of wine.

"So," Cannon said after drinking half of the wine in the goblet in one swallow. "You don't enjoy being in the caravan's rear. Neither do we."

"For myself, I despise breathing in the dust of so many wagons and the shit of so many horses, but for my young Ringleaders, it is unacceptable," Teaser said. "Lucrid tells me you are no ordinary

master of wagons, but master of horses and men as well."

"As is any good wagon master," said Cannon.

"He knows the back roads well," Lucrid said, patting Cannon on the back. "Don't let his modesty fool you. But, there are rogues in the forest and soldiers looking for them. Alone, either of our parties are tempting targets."

Eugene scooted closer to Teaser's leg, searching for his face in the small opening between the table and his body. She knew that grin; he had a plan.

Teaser took a sip of wine. "No ordinary rogues would attack a party guarded by red Goblins. However, if there are any extraordinary rogues out there, even my friend here might need aid."

Eugene backed up as one of the Goblin guards burped and slammed a tankard down on the table. It sat on Teaser's left, but its legs were so short she'd missed it. It glared at her with red, flaming eyes. Ale dripped down the side of its wide, thin lips, behind which sat long, sharp teeth.

"Rip and tear, flesh and bone," Carnelian said, wiping the wine off its chin with sharp, clawed fingers before laughing. "Not like soft slaves that hunt and kill with knives." It spat, aiming away from Eugene, and clicked its claws together. "Claws grip and tear. Teeth bite and break."

"My men have bows and swords," Cannon said, nodding. "We kill to protect ourselves and our cargo. I don't look for fights."

Teaser leaned over the table and lowered his voice. "Neither Captain Carnelian nor I is suggesting there will be one. We fight to defend our charges, our lives, and our offerings to Mother."

"As do we," said Lucrid. "You're suggesting a pact of mutual protection, should the need arise."

Eugene shifted from one paw to another. Her heart raced. They were making plans without her. She almost barked, but Teaser's hand appeared near her head, his finger pointing down.

"Not that either you or I need protection on a road so well

guarded," he said. "And yet, together we are stronger than we are alone. As our purposes merge, so may our journeys."

Lucrid lifted his goblet. "To safe journeys and common purposes."

Cannon finished his goblet and pounded it on the table as Carnelian did the same with his mug. The echo made Eugene jump and hit the underside of the table. If anyone noticed, they made no sign.

"Three hours," said Cannon. "Get me a distraction, and I'll have my lot in the forest with none being the wiser."

Carnelian laughed, which sounded so much like rocks rolling down the wall, Eugene risked looking out from under the table to make sure there were no rocks heading towards her. "Reds sneaky. We make distraction."

"Come on, mutt," Cannon said, standing. "We've got work to do."

Eugene barked, but followed him back to the caravan. CC stood on the edge of the road, watching them.

"Get yourself in the wagon," Cannon told her without stopping. "We're leaving."

Eugene jumped on the wagon as Ebon appeared and lifted CC. Without a sound, he placed the food crates in the wagon before moving on to help with the others.

"What did you tell Teaser?" CC said as soon as they were alone.

"Didn't have a chance to say anything. He and Lucrid were already planning on leaving the caravan: something about traveling back roads.

"Look," CC said, nodding to the center of the wagons.

Carnelian walked into the center of the ring, picked up the cooking stones with no gloves, extinguished their heat, and placed them in their carrying crates one at a time.

Eugene pushed and pulled at the blanket next to CC. "Might as well get some sleep while we can." When she turned her head, CC was already lying down.

CC yawned and closed her eyes, saying, “Keep an eye on Wren. We’ll need her to get to the rogues.”

THE SLIGHTEST LURCH FORWARD, the quietest squeak of wheels turning, and the almost silent click of Ebon's lips woke Eugene, and along with the scents of horse and the road, the forest and men, there was another smell. She put her front paws over the side of the wagon and looked around. Carnelian jogged alongside the wagon, signaling his guards: one stationed next to each of the wagon’s wheels.

Behind her, CC rolled to her side and whispered, “The wagon’s never moved so smoothly.”

Shushing came from the front of the wagon where Ebon sat with his head bent low and nose twitching left and right, back and forth. Eugene jumped on top of the supplies and made her way to his side. She whimpered quietly, but Ebon’s only reply was to shush her again. It didn’t matter; Eugene saw what she wanted to see. She ran back to CC, now leaning over the side of the wagon to watch the red Goblins.

“Teaser’s ahead of us with Mandrake, who doesn’t look happy.” CC twisted her head to look, but Eugene bumped her head against hers. “No lighting stones: the Goblins and I can see, but you won’t be able to.

CC nodded. “There are more Goblins here than we’ve seen before.”

Shushing came from someone positioned below them.

Eugene snorted. “Humans can’t tell the difference between one Goblin and the other. Carnelian’s using it to his advantage. Pretty sure that’s Ari riding up. I’m going to see what’s going on.

CC nodded just as Ari caught up with the wagon. Eugene leaped to the top of the cargo and whimpered. Ari smiled, waving her over to his horse. She leaped on with no trouble, but the horse looked

back and glared at her.

Ari held a finger to his lips and mouthed, “Not a sound.”

They rode next to the cart until it passed through a thick clump of trees. The roar of men fighting erupted behind them. Eugene stood in the saddle with her paws on Ari’s shoulders to look behind them as lights flashed, followed by the sounds of fists meeting flesh. Ari grinned, but said nothing as he repositioned Eugene to her perch in front of him.

Teaser rode up next to CC. Even though he was whispering, his laughter tickled Eugene’s ears. “Someone’s wagon master just discovered his son in bed with another wagon master’s daughter, along with some of his coins.”

Eugene held back a snort, which Ari thought was a sneeze. “Bless you,” he whispered.

Shushing sounds came from below and above him. Eugene sighed and looked around wondering where all the Red Goblins had come from.

The hours on Ari’s horse dragged. The last voice Eugene heard was Teaser’s telling her that Carnelian had whispered to different wagon masters about coins missing and sons and daughters not sleeping where they ought. It didn’t take long for one of his rumors to prove true. By then, the wagon masters and their crews, still awake, were drunk and ready to let off steam after Swill’s ardent adherence to schedule and discipline.

Before midnight, Eugene jumped on the wagon Wren drove. She said nothing as Eugene curled up next to her, yawned, and went to sleep.

Sometime before dawn, Eugene woke and stretched. The sound of wagon wheels rolling along a path accompanied hushed voices. The road was only two parallel dirt paths with short growth between them.

“A common back road,” whispered Wren. “Merchants use it when they don’t want soldiers inspecting their carts. They pay a small fee for the privilege, or they're robbed.”

Eugene's ear itched. She scratched it, then headbutted Wren's arm. Wren refused to look at her, so, with a sigh, Eugene went to the back of the wagon and looked around. The Goblins and Lucrid were ahead of them; the supply cart with CC in it brought up the rear. She sniffed and found Bart sleeping under the canopy of her wagon, so she pushed aside the tarp and licked his face. He woke up smiling and scratched her ears. After a nudge, he got up, climbed to the front seat, and took the reins from Wren. Eugene barked in her ear and jumped down to jog to the rear cart. Wren followed and jumped on the back with CC as Teaser rode up, dismounted, and walked his horse over to them.

"You wanted to see me?" asked Wren.

CC nodded. "When will the wagons stop?"

"Not until well after the sunrise," said Teaser. "We must be as far from the hostel as we can when Swill discovers we are gone."

"Why?" barked Eugene

"I'm sure he's seen us talking," said CC. "More than an old woman and her dog should."

"And," interrupted Wren, "you're remarkably obedient and curious for a common mutt."

"It is you, CC, he fears," Teaser said with a shake of his head. Eugene and CC both looked at Teaser with wide eyes. Teaser lowered his voice. "Your staff: you do not keep it wrapped as well as you should. One look only told me it was a troll's staff. Always full of magic and surprises is a Troll's staff."

Eugene's tail wagged. "You can use it to make me me again!

"Hold on." CC shook her head. "You can use this to fix us?"

Eugene bounced up and looked at Teaser, but he shook his head.

"I fear I do not know how to use Ol'Sassie's magic." he said.

"Hey," barked Eugene. "How did you know it was Ol'Sassie's staff? I didn't tell you about her saving us when we got here."

"Ol'Sassie and her magic make legends, and I knew her. She is a great teacher and true friend. Her staff is carved from the first root of the first tree." Teaser's eyes glazed over and Eugene waited in

perfect stillness as memories raced over his face. “When I was a young Goblin, she was already old and wise. The Wildes may be lost without her guidance.”

Wren’s face scrunched up as she looked from Teaser and CC to Eugene. "You both understand—?"

“Our friend,” Teaser said, “She is most easily understood by those who wish to listen to her, but she likes the sound of her own voice over much, and that has raised suspicions."

Eugene growled.

Wren folded her arms and stared first at Teaser, then CC, and then Eugene. After a long sigh, she dropped her arms. “I should get back to the others. Swill will come after you and find my pack. I need to warn them.”

She jumped off the wagon, but before she could take another step, Eugene jumped off the cart and barked at her. Wren turned back to see Teaser lift CC off the wagon and lift her onto his horse.

“We’ll come with you,” CC said.

Wren’s face lit up so brightly Eugene was sure everyone could see.

“We make no promises,” CC hedged.

Wren smiled and took the reins from Teaser to lead his horse. “You’ll all be welcome.”

“Quietly,” whispered Teaser.

One of Carnelian’s guards walked along a long tree branch above them. Teaser nodded, and the guard glided to the next tree and disappeared.

“That’s so cool,” said CC.

“The protection of the Reds is absolute,” whispered Teaser. “Nevertheless, I will not leave the side of my charge.”

WREN’S FOOTSTEPS never hesitated as she led them through thickets and around massive trees that grew wider and taller the

deeper they went into the forest. Eugene dashed between Wren and Teaser, who led CC on his horse. Further behind them, she could just make out Ari on his horse. Instinctually, she knew the Reds were also following them, but she could not see or hear them.

Wren stopped where the land rose—which was almost imperceptible with all the trees—and motioned for Eugene to be still. An owl hooted, and nightingales whistled. Eugene's ears and nose twitched when she recognized human voices making the birdcalls. She ran back to the horse and Teaser, who helped CC dismount. The smell of Wolf excited her. Her tail wagged and the fur along her spine rose.

"The alpha, the one we met, is coming," she told CC.

Wren turned and laughed. "He's heard you coming for the past mile."

The hill was steep, and even with Teaser's aid, CC had to stop every few feet to catch her breath. Just before she crested the hill, she unwrapped Ol'Sassi's staff.

"If it's recognizable," she said to Eugene, "we might as well let them know we have a tool that could help them." After a few more steps, she added between gulps of breaths, "And it makes it easier to walk."

Eugene wanted to run ahead with Wren, but CC's wheezing held her back. She nipped at the back of Wren's knee to slow down, then jumped up and took the reins of Teaser's horse in her mouth. With his arms free, Teaser carried CC the rest of the way.

On top of the hill stood three broad, lean figures. Wren ran to them and threw her arms around the one in the middle. They kissed as only lovers that had been parted did. CC, leaning on the old staff, coughed, not meaning to interrupt them, but to fill her lungs with air.

Wren stepped away and smiled. "This is Claude. You've met, even if you didn't exchange names."

Eugene barked, then stood back as Claude and the others bowed to her.

“Thank you for coming. We’ve waited a long time for you.”

Eugene looked up to CC. “Now what?”

“Well met, friends.” Teaser bowed and pointed at Eugene. “The Painted Wolf is spelled. Even I, who is not without skill in the use of Mother’s magic, cannot undo this spell. We come to aid, but we make no promises. Know that our hearts are true to our mutual causes.”

Claude nodded at Teaser. “Wren told us of your arrival. We didn’t know you’d come, too, but you’re welcome.” He bowed to CC. “With your permission, Grandmother, we will carry you to our camp.”

Eugene barked and stood at CC’s side, but CC waved her away. Claude’s companions locked arms, forming a seat, and arranged CC between them. She giggled like a schoolgirl, and Eugene harrumphed.

She stayed close to CC as they walked down the hill. The trees parted, allowing her to see a camp by a stream singing through a clearing. Wolves sat or stood around two great stumps, and they all pointed at Eugene as the group approached. Eugene stopped and stared at them as CC companions helped her sit on the closest of the tree stumps.

“I’m younger than I appear,” CC whispered to the men carrying her.

Eugene kept close to CC’s side. ”Oh, man. This sucks.”

“Yes, it does,” said CC. One man carrying her furrowed his brow, clearly uncertain who CC was speaking to. She shrugged, pointing her nose to Eugene. “It’s complicated.”

As CC settled, Claude, Wren, and Teaser sat on the ground and others in the pack joined them forming a semi-circle. Wren brought her a mug of wine.

A woman brought CC a mug of warmed wine. “This will refresh you, Grandmother.”

CC nodded her thanks as Eugene walked around the stump taking in the scent of the Wolves and the humans with them.

Finally, she jumped on the stump and sat next to CC.

"There are as many humans here as Wolves."

CC drank her wine and looked at Claude. "Humans and Wolves in one pack?"

Claude looked to Wren, then back at CC. "Forgive me, Grandmother, I don't understand. Why would families not live together?"

Eugene laughed. "He's got you there. I mean, I live with you."

CC grinned as she nodded at Eugene. "Neither of us are from the Wildes."

"Witches discourage cooperation," said Teaser, "but only on the most official of levels." He accepted a mug of wine and drank it all in one gulp. "I must admit, many years have passed since I lived in the Wildes, and so much has changed. When I left, witches were still friends to all, but perhaps I oversimplify."

Ari surprised everyone by walking up the half-circle with Carnelian at his side, "The Witches are afraid humans won't fear the Wolves if everybody lives together, just like the Goblin Ringleaders are afraid humans and Goblins will live together peacefully."

"Told you he was smart," Eugene said to CC.

"Ari," Teaser scolded as he jumped to his feet. "You shouldn't jump into conversations you were not invited to participate in. Did everybody follow you?"

He turned to scowl at Carnelian, but Mandrake interjected, "We follow the Ringlet. Or have you forgotten who leads the Goblins?"

"I should have thought—"

"Later, Teaser." CC nodded toward Claude as Ari and Mandrake sat on the ground with Teaser, expanding their circle.

"If this is all so new to you," Claude said with a nod at Eugene, "then is she not the Painted Wolf we've been told to look for?"

Eugene hung her head. "I don't know."

"I don't know any other Painted Wolf," said CC. "Does anyone here have tattoos?"

"Interesting," said Teaser. "I had not thought of that."

Ari sat up and looked at Eugene. “Do you mean Nibbler is—?”

“Not what she seems,” finished Teaser. “I told you to be careful what you said to her.”

Eugene jumped off the stump and put her muzzle in Ari’s ear. He wouldn’t look at her, keeping his face low and staring at the earth. She sniffed. Other than his embarrassment and his sweet, fresh youth, she smelled the Wolves, Claude’s alpha, Wren’s joy, and then —just barely floating between the leaves of the trees—Swill.

Eugene turned to face downwind. Her hackles raised. She bared her fangs wet and drooling, and growled a long, low warning.

Teaser, Ari, and Mandrake rose as one while Claude howled. The Wolves in the pack answered, and soon, clothes were thrown aside as they transformed and raced toward the approaching soldiers.

“Go!” Claude shouted to Wren.

“Stay with us,” Teaser said, pulling Wren to him. “They won’t dare.”

“They would,” Claude said just before transforming.

Eugene raced toward the soldiers and Swill. Anger pushed her to run faster than she ever had, but her mutt legs wouldn’t let her run as fast as a Wolf. Beside her, Claude and the others held back, matching their pace to hers.

“Stupid rules,” Eugene muttered. She ground her claws into the earth, stopping, almost being run-over over by a Wolf behind her. “Run!” she yelled again, this time choking with frustration.

No one would outrun a pack leader, and no pack leader would outrun a legendary leader. Growling, Eugene bit Claude’s hind leg and glared at him. He backed away, but didn’t run, so she bit him again—drawing blood this time—and barked toward the howls of his pack and the shouts of the soldiers ahead of them. Claude nodded, barked at the pack, and ran to the fight. She followed as fast as she could, but the Wolves soon disappeared over the top of the hill.

Dianttha shifted the books in the bag as she placed the last bundle inside.

“Thanks, Pops,” she whispered, peering out at him from the window of the tiny workroom. The scowl on his face and worry in his eyes made her breath catch, but she reached out to touch his shoulder. “It’s okay. I promise.”

“I don’t like it,” Maël whispered back. “You didn’t tell me they were for her.”

“Pops,” she began, but looking into his eyes so dark, so worried, and so exhausted, she held her breath and lowered her eyes. “I’m sorry to involve you, but if I go to the library, the old biddies will look through everything I get and question me. The princess isn’t the silly girl the queen makes her out to be.”

Maël’s shoulders slouched, and Dianttha pushed through the window to kiss him on the cheek.

“It’s all going to work out. When the prince arrives, he and—”

“The queen will never let him near the Heart,” snapped her father. “He’s as good as dead.”

Dianttha shuddered not so much at the steel in her father’s voice, but at his desperation. “Don’t give up, Pops. Help Ari get here. I’ll get him to Arika. It’s the only way to save Mother. Arika is just realizing that, too.” She squeezed his hand, feeling the fear he carried. “Help me do this so my brothers will never wear a collar.”

Maël stared into Dianttha's eyes. She smiled seeing the glimmer of hope he kept buried deep inside.

“Go, daughter, before you're missed.”

DIANTTHA WATCHED him slip into the shadows before she closed the window and examined the many bottles of potions and perfumes scattered across the worktable. She picked the smallest one, unstoppered it, and sniffed. ”Perfect,” she said to herself, unable to resist a triumphant smile.

The sudden thumping of heavy feet in the hallway made her jump, almost dropping the bottle.

“Guard shift,” she muttered.

She wrapped the small bottle in a stained rag, arranged it under the top books in her bag, and dashed out the door. The voices of many little girls drifted to her from the hall, and she quickened her pace. Turning the corner, the door to Arika’s rooms loomed close.

“Lady Dianttha!” Lady Uflora shouted from behind her.

Dianttha caught her breath, held it, and let it out slowly as she turned and lowered her eyes. “Lady Uflora.”

“Ladies do not run in the hall,” Lady Uflora snapped. The little girls behind her broke into a chorus of giggles.

Standing in the middle of the girls and not giggling, Arika nodded at Dianttha. “Come, ladies. Let’s see what we have for tea today.”

The girls followed their princess, casting wary glances at Dianttha as they walked past her.

“What are you doing?” Lady Uflora asked after the last girl entered Arika’s room and closed the door behind them.

Dianttha let her shoulders slump. “Apologies, Lady Uflora. I had hoped to be back before the lesson was finished.”

Lady Uflora’s nose twitched as she stared at the bag on Dianttha’s arm. “And that? Books from the shape of it. I specifically told you I would provide the princess’s reading material.”

“Oh, these aren’t for her!,” exclaimed Dianttha, doing her best to look shocked. “I would never. No. You gave me very specific instructions. No, these are mine.” She set the bag on the floor, relieved to no longer carry the heavy bag. Pulling out the first book, she explained, “This is on the ruby flora of the mountain pass on the Westest Road. I recall from my old lessons that it contained a particularly subtle fragrance that also soothed the pain of arthritis. I noticed Lady Rhodila, poor thing, has been having some difficulty with her knees of late. Now this one…”

As she pulled out the next book, the small bottle wrapped in the

dirty rag fell out. “Oh, sorry,” she said and held her breath long enough for her cheeks to turn pink before looking up to Lady Uflora. “This is a little side project of mine. It’s not very good.”

“Show me,” demanded Lady Uflora.

“It’s nothing, really,” stuttered Dianttha. Still kneeling, she unwrapped a small bottle and presented it to Lady Uflora. “Would you, well, I wouldn’t ask, but it’s a new scent. Much too grand for the princess, of course, but I’m not sure. Would you tell me what you think?”

Lady Uflora unstoppered the bottle, keeping it away from her face, and sniffed. Her eyes remained fixed on Dianttha, but as soon as the scent reached her nose, her face softened. Even her eyes lost their fierceness. She moved the bottle closer to her nose.

“Dianttha, this is lovely.”

Dianttha no longer needed to hide her satisfied smile. “Do you really think so? I’ve been so worried. Well, I thought when you gave me the opportunity to serve the High Coven, and with the princess; Well, I wanted to make something special, but you know my skills. I was afraid it wouldn’t be up to your standards.”

“Yes, yes.” Lady Uflora interrupted as she put a drop of the perfume on her wrist, and then held her wrist to her nose. “Best get back to our duties. The princess won’t be interested in those books: too academic for her little mind. Come."

Lady Uflora swept past Dianttha without another word.

Dianttha repacked her bag and entered Arika’s rooms wearing a smile she hadn’t felt in a long time.

DIANTTHA’S CHIN DROPPED, hitting her chest. She sat up, yawned, stretched, and looked around the dark room. Arika sat in the far corner on a tiny stool near the warming stones, using their light to read.

She looked up from her book and squinted to see Dianttha in her

darkened corner. “You awake?”

“Yes,” she said, trying to sound like was more awake than she felt.

“You snore when you sleep sitting up. I always thought sitting up was supposed to keep snorers quiet.” Arika turned back to her book. “You should move over here. It’s awfully cold tonight.”

As if the mere word had reminded her of its presence, Dianttha rubbed her arms, suddenly freezing, and moved to Arika’s side. As she did, she looked down at the stack of books she’d brought Arika that afternoon. The pile had moved from the girl’s left to her right.

“Have you read all of these?”

“Yes.”

“You started when Lady Uflora left?”

“Yes.” Arika looked up at Dianttha. “What do you know about charmed bones?”

“Charmed bones? Sounds like something Goblins would use. They place the oddest meanings on the most ordinary things,” Diantta replied. “I need to heat some more stones.”

Dianttha stood and turned towards Arika’s receiving room, but stopped as Arika said, “When Ari gets here, we’re going to heal the Heart of Mother, and then we can have a nice summer. It’s our charmed bones that will do it.”

“Wait.” Dianttha held her hand up. “Let me get more warming stones, and then you can tell me about it.”

In the receiving room, Lady Rhodia was sleeping on a chair in front of the large hearth. Dianttha tucked a blanket around the old woman’s shoulders before picking up a tray holding a teapot and unused warming stones.

“Anything wrong, dear?” the lady asked in her scratchy, old voice.

“Fetching more warming stones for the princess,” replied Dianttha. “It’s very cold.”

“Oh, yes,” the old witch said with a yawn as her eyes closed. “Have I thanked you for that salve? The one you made for my

knees. Wonderous! It's no longer so hard to get up all those stairs. Maybe you can make some more, if you have…"

Her voice faded to a soft snore.

"Here," Dianttha said to Arika. "We can have some tea while we wait for the stones to heat."

Arika closed her book. "Can I do it?"

Dianttha looked back at the closed door.

"Lady Rhodia's deafer than a doornail and fast asleep," said Arika, taking a stone off the tray.

The sudden loss of its weight made the tray tilt, but Dianttha kept it steady. "Fine, but quickly."

"I can't believe I'm not even supposed to know how to do this," Arika muttered, stacking the stone close to the ones already glowing. "Actually, I can. I mean, if you think this is magic, and Witches actually charge people for the privilege of doing what they could easily do for themselves, it's just so…so. Dianttha, when I'm queen, there's going to be lots of changes."

"Slow down," she whispered as she watched Arika take a pinch of powders from the pouch near the hearth and sprinkle them on the new stones. "Say what I told you to say."

Arika rolled her eyes with a heavy sign, but waved her hand over the stones. "From our Mother's Heart, a warm embrace." Turning back to Dianttha, she snarked, "Happy?"

"It never hurts to remember we depend upon the earth to survive, especially in these times."

Dianttha sat next to Arika, wrapped her blanket over both their shoulders. "There, now we'll both be warm."

"Thank you." Dianttha poured the hot water out of the teapot into the two cups as Arika dropped tea leaves in them. "Now, what's this about charmed bones?"

Arika held her cup near her face with both hands, letting the steam billow up to her chin. "I had a dream. Well, perhaps not a dream, more like a…" Arika squeezed her eyes shut and pursed her lips. "It was like the thought wasn't mine. It was Ari's; I know it

was. We've always been able to finish each other's sentences and such, but this was different. He's worried about finding charmed bones because he's been told we need them to heal Mother. Does that make any sense? Not the knowing what he's thinking part, because that's just weird, but considering everything going on and all the changes we've had to go through, it doesn't upset me. I meant the charmed bones part, even though I think I've figured it out."

Dianttha put her hand on Arika's arm. "Slow down. As the time of the Alignment draws close, more and more of the Peoples of the Wildes come here with treasures they've gleaned from the earth as gifts to Mother. These gifts show that we value the earth more than any one part of her. I've seen and heard of many different types of gifts, but charmed bones? I don't like the sound of it."

"I was worried, too," said Arika, "but I've been reading about the last time the Alignment failed. By the way, has the queen actually said how or why the alignment broke?"

"She still denies it happened," Dianttha admitted, shaking her head. "As far as the people are concerned, Mother's Heart is broken and we must gather to heal her. It will work—"

"Only if the offerings are balanced," Arika finished for her. "That's the charmed bones part. Don't you see? That's me and Ari."

A deep freeze settled over Dianttha so quickly she forgot to breathe. Arika took her cup and rubbed her hands with her own.

"No," said Arika, talking faster than usual. "I'm sorry. I didn't say it right. We're not going to be sacrificed, although I think Ari thinks we will, but that won't work. Ari and I are charmed bones. We were made by the magic that Mother gives us. You're the one who explained how Goblins don't have specific sexes. The only way a Witch and Goblin, like my parents, were going to have a child is by using magic. That's why Ari and I are the charmed bones."

Dianttha felt the air fill her lungs as warmth spread through her again. "When Pops first brought me here, I learned more from being quiet and listening than I ever did in books. Lady Gobo, my mentor,

she was very old and knew more than any of us ever will. Anyway, she told me to always listen. Even then, everyone knew that something was wrong with Mother. The greatest minds of all the Peoples have studied, theorized, cast spells, and done all they can to mend her, and you come along, and just like that. You say you're going to fix all our troubles just by being yourselves."

Despite herself, Dianttha laughed, and Arika joined in.

"Hey, I'm just a kid. What do I know?"

They laughed until tears ran down their cheeks and the princess's head fell to Dianttha's shoulder.

In a sleepy whisper, she said, "I've been reading all night every night for five nights in a row. Despite what the books say, I know I'm right."

Dianttha nodded. "I believe you, but we must be careful."

"OH, YES," Arika said to the governor of Turo. He was a fidgety man who couldn't have been much older than Dianttha, but he acted as if he were ancient. "My aunt takes judicious care of me. I couldn't ask to be in better hands."

Arika poured on all the charms of a natural princess. It still surprised Dianttha, as she stood behind Arika's chair at the long dining table, how well the little girl—who could talk faster than a bluebird, who never sat still without something to occupy her hands, and who always said whatever thoughts popped into her head—could be such a fine lady when the queen brought her out for these formal occasions.

Arika put her hand on the governor's as his fingers anxiously tapped the table. "You know," she said, letting her large, green eyes shine, "I believe you're the first governor I've met that's so easy to talk to. You'll never know how grateful I am for that."

The governor's fingers stilled, and he smiled a genuine smile at her. "You're also very easy to talk to. I'm glad we've had this time

together."

Arika smiled, crinkling her nose the way she thought men thought cute. "Me, too. But, I'm afraid our meal is over, and I must go back to my lessons. It was so nice meeting you. Until next time."

Dianttha pulled out her chair and whispered, "Laying it on a bit thick, don't you think?"

ARIKA, still smiling at the man, turned to her aunt at the end of the table and executed a perfect curtsey before leaving the hall.

"Poor man was terrified, Dianttha," she whispered as they reached the doors to the private stairs. "And he was thick, but he said something that got me thinking."

Before she walked on, Arika stopped, and Dianttha almost bumped into her.

"Ladies," Arika said to the girls following her. "Not sure I'll make it back to my rooms. Go ahead. Come, Dianttha?"

Arika led them to the latrine door, but before opening the door, she looked behind her. "They gone?"

Dianttha nodded. "Yes. What are you—?"

Arika was already running up a narrow staircase before Dianttha could finish her question.

"Arika!" Dianttha hissed. "These lead to the queen's rooms. Where are we doing?"

Arika stopped only long enough to turn and put her finger to her lips. "Come on. Not much time."

The narrow stairs twisted round and round the narrow tower until they finally reached a wooden door near the top. Dianttha gasped and reached out to stop Arika from touching the door, but the princess placed her in the center of the door. It shimmered like a pond in the shade; Dianttha held her breath, certain alarms would sound, but the only sound was the click of the door unlocking.

"It worked," Arika said with a giggle as she stepped into the

room. “I’ve seen my aunt come in here enough times. I knew there was some sort of magical security system, so I read all about them last night and figured I could get in easily enough. But, we have to hurry.”

Dianttha hesitated for the briefest of moments, but followed her into the darkened room, much smaller than she imagined a queen would want. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness broken only by two lighting stones on either side of a desk made of the blackest stone, she noticed three simple chairs placed near the walls. The desk held stacks of papers, used and new quills with ink pots, and, in the center, a book. A quill stuck out from between its pages and glowed green. As Arika removed it from the desk, the edges of the papers within the book also glowed green.

“Oh,” whispered Dianttha, “I’ve only read about those.”

“I’ve seen the queen use it when I’ve come to see her. She always puts it away when I enter, so it’s something she doesn’t want me to know about, which means it must be important.” Arika said. “I read about these last night, too. That’s why I wanted to get it. Let’s go.”

Arika lifted her skirt and put the book in a hidden pocket on her hip and as she reached the door.

“Arika!” Dianttha wanted to scream, but settled for whisper-shouting as she grabbed Arika’s arm. “We can’t steal the queen’s journal. She’ll know we took it.”

Arika pulled herself up to her full height. “How?”

Dianttha pointed to the door. “Security? Your touch? I don’t know, but she’ll know.”

“Nonsense.” Arika turned and opened the door just enough to see the narrow hall outside. “Do you think I’d risk something like this if I wasn’t sure? Where should we go to open it? Oh,” she stepped into the stairwell, “we should probably go back to my rooms first. Don’t want anyone wondering where we are.”

LADY UFLORA RUSHED into Arika's rooms, her face full of storms, ready to let loose. "What are you doing inside on a day like this?"

Dianttha cringed and looked at Arika, who looked up from the table where she sat helping one of the younger girls read.

"It's very hot out," Arika said. "And you wanted us to read these chapters before tomorrow's lessons."

Dianttha wished she could sink into the small stool where she was perched reading her own book. She tried not to stare at Arika's skirt, under which the queen's journal still sat in the pocket of her petticoat.

Lady Uflora walked around the room, picking up the books the girls were reading, thumbing through them, and then handing them back. "True, but fresh air is healthy for the young, and you all look too pale. Go. At once now. Go to the gardens. Lessons can wait."

The younger girls giggled excitedly, while the older ones looked to Arika, whose smile was full of platitude.

"You know best. Let's go, ladies."

In less than an hour, Dianttha turned the key in the rusty lock of the door to the old cellar workroom. Sunlight filtered through broken boards on the three high windows. She smiled as she breathed in dried herbs, spilled essential oils, and her memories under the dust and mold.

"I spent my first years here, studying with Lady Gobo."

Arika walked around, staring at all the broken bits of bottles and bowls. Her fingers reached for many items, but she didn't touch them. "What did you study?"

"Healing: Lady Gobo was one of the greatest healers." Dianttha moved to a small table under one window and picked up a book still open and had a dried quill on the page. "This was where I took notes and studied."

"Why aren't you a healer?" Arika asked.

Dianttha closed the book and placed it back on the table. "Like I said, she was one of the greatest. That meant she was an enemy to the queen and others in the High Coven. She never agreed with

their practices, and she let them know her opinions."

Dianttha closed her eyes, remembering the good times and hoping they would drown out the pain. "She kept me here, away from the others, and told me I must never let them know how clever I was—not if I wanted to protect my family. She died almost a year ago. The High Coven didn't know what to do with me after that, but they needed my father's loyalty. I told you, I live far from here. He's a soldier and a great leader, but even he fears the collar for my brothers."

Arika's hand slid into hers. "We're both stuck, aren't we? Well, let's not be stuck any longer than we have to be." She lay the book on the desk. "How does this work?"

Dianttha stopped her from opening the book. "It can be dangerous. Let me think." Turning, she scanned the room for the tools she wanted. "First, let's make sure it's not a trap."

From a dusty basket, she pulled out a dried vine, held it to her nose, and breathed in. Smiling, she moved to another table. "Vine's old, but there is still power in it. It naturally grows in darkness. On the Spring Equinox, under the light of the moon, it blooms with flowers that intoxicate. It can be deadly, but it also eases pain. The vine binds tighter than iron. There's just enough moisture in here to keep it alive." She pulled open a tiny drawer tucked in the leg of a table on the far side of the room. From it, she pulled out a tiny box, opened it, and smiled again. "Water: see if you can get a cup from that pump over there." She sat down as Arika pumped and pumped until the sound of water splashing on the floor made her look up. "Just a cup."

Arika rinsed out the only cup she could find and handed it to Dianttha, who drank it in one gulp.

"All this dust is making me thirsty."

"Oh," Arika pointed at the journal, "I thought you needed it for that."

"Just a drop for the vine," she replied. "Now, get ready; I don't know what's going to happen. This place, despite those windows, is

still sealed by Lady Gobo's protections. She liked to experiment, and sometimes they got very loud."

Dianttha opened the book to the page marked by the quill. Blank, but the green glow returned and the quill floated to an upright position, its tip poised and ready to write.

Arika whispered, "Nothing…should we write in—oh!"

Ink oozed out of the quill as it danced along the page, forming words.

Where have you been? What's going on? Have you abandoned me? Have you heard from your sister?

The quill stopped as though its writer had been interrupted, or perhaps realized the wrong eyes were reading words. The green light swirled round and round, and glittering gold sparks flickered in and out within it. Dianttha reached for the quill, but Arika screamed.

Above them hovered a shadow darker than darkness. It swirled and pulsed, sending dust and debris around them.

"This can't be good!" Arika cried over the roar with wind.

"Shadow magic," whispered Dianttha.

She opened the tiny box and pulled out a black stone, slamming it into the pages of the open book. A deep, painful scream shook her bones, but she found the strength to close the book, sing the song of binding, and wrap the vine around the book.

The shadows above them screeched a final howl and faded to a green glow that swirled itself into a small tornado spinning backwards into the book as the vine shimmered gold, bright and blinding, and bathed the room in comfort.

At last, the light faded. Dianttha gazed at the journal on the desk: old, tattered, and covered with dusty vines.

"The Fae," she said.

"Fairies?" asked Arika. Dianttha turned to find her sitting on the floor. She stood and dusted herself off. "There are fairies around and nobody told me?"

"Fae," said Dianttha. "And this is not good. We have to guard

this. Whoever the queen has been communicating with knows she no longer has the book. If a Fae is in the Wildes, it will come for us. Let's hope it's still in its own world."

"Fae have their own world?" Arika asked. "You need to explain."

Dianttha locked the door to her old workroom behind them. "First, we get this to Pops to hide. If we're found with it…" She shivered and pulled Arika along behind her. "I'll explain later."

Eugene

Anger coursed through Eugene's veins pouring out of her skin and fur.

Gruff and frightened voices yelled, "This way!"

"They're coming!"

"Tighten those nets!"

"Grab the children!"

She barked as loudly as she could, "Trap!" She pushed her short legs to run faster. She tried to fill her lungs, but no amount of air made her faster. She ran until the sounds of yelps, howls, barks for help, nets falling, ropes creaking, and arrows flying surrounded her. Wolf Soldiers ran across her path, ignoring her. Human soldiers tackled Wolves caught in the nets, while others ran in with ropes to wrap muzzles and tie paws together. Rogue Wolves bit and tour flesh. Swill stood to the side, grinning, and Owen stood behind him, his face blank, unseeing.

"Damn him," whispered Eugene.

Neither the Wolves nor Humans paid attention to the mutt running between them, but Swill saw her and smiled. He raised out his arm, but before he could lower it, an arrow whistled past her and into his shoulder. Owen remained standing and let him fall. He looked down at Swill, but he did not move.

Eugene's hackles rose as a familiar voice murmured, "That'll keep the bastard down."

Eugene looked up to find Ebon beside her wearing a grin more wicked than any she'd ever seen on anyone. "Best stay with me, mutt, or you'll get hurt."

Ebon aimed another arrow at Swill, but a soldier tackled him from behind, pushing him to the ground. The soldier lifted a long knife. Eugene leaped forward, growling. Anger rushed through her, pushing her legs and paws to grow. Her inner Werewolf burst out as her fangs grabbed the man's arm, ripping it off.

Landing on all fours, she spit out the arm and rose to her hind legs before letting out a howl heard for miles and miles.

"No, you don't!" shouted Swill.

Eugene turned. Owen helped Swill stand before pulling the arrow out of his shoulder. The smell of his blood mixed with the fear rippling through the soldiers and the Werewolves around her excited a hunger for more blood.

She circled the Werewolves, barking at them to stop. All of them, those on two and four legs, stared at her. Three ran to Owen before changing direction so they could stand behind her. Each released their inner Wolves, and she howled again. No one moved.

"Get the net on her, damn it!" shouted Swill.

First came the rush of wind as the net flew, then came the yelps of the Werewolves behind her. Eugene felt the net cover her before she saw it. She jumped forward, knocking over two soldiers, but her hind legs were caught in the net. Falling on her belly, she rolled onto her back, inadvertently wrapping her hind legs tightly together. She reached out to bite a hand moving toward her, and a rope wrapped tight around her neck. Whoever threw it pulled it so tight she couldn't breathe. Still, she thrashed and pulled those holding her.

Swill leaned over her. "Hold still."

Eugene's anger turned to fear. Swill held a collar with a black stone in his hand. She squirmed, but the more she did, the tighter the rope around her neck. Gray clouds swirled in her peripheral vision, until the only thing she could see was the black stone. No, it

wasn't black. It was red, like dried blood. It was her blood, and as soon as that collar touched her, she knew she was lost.

There was a flash of green, and a familiar voice shouted, "No!"

It sounded so far away Eugene wasn't sure she heard it. She twisted her head toward the voice as the rope at her throat loosened. Green smoke, rose from the ground, filling her vision with sparkling fireflies before blackness took over, and then clean, night air filled her lungs.

She twisted and jumped to stand on her four paws. With a shake, the net and ropes binding her fell to the ground. She ran to CC, holding Ol'Sassi's great staff with both hands as the green smoke continued to rise from the earth, sparkling through the air and then drifting down to cover everyone.

"Eugene!" shouted CC. "I can't hold it!"

Eugene halted on two legs in front of CC and reached out her hands. Closing her eyes against the bright light glowing from the staff and CC's long, red hair as it blew into her face, she saw her own fingers tattooed with tiny vines and flowers. Electricity ran from the earth to her feet, up her legs and spine, and exploded in her head. Both she and her inner Werewolf howled as pain threatened to rip her heart out. A single note answered her, or maybe it was the combined howls of those around her, filling her head and turning the green light to gold.

Eugene fell to the ground, her hands still gripping the staff. Her lungs ached, but with each breath, more air entered her lungs until they were able to slow to their normal rhythm. A blanket, soft and warm, fell over her shoulders and back.

From the silence that filled the forest where soldiers and wolves had once been fighting broke a sob so pitiful, so lonely, it broke her heart. She lifted her head to see Swill fall to his knees ten feet away from her, his face hidden behind his hands as blood poured from his shoulder. Owen stood next to him, his collar in his hand. Tears ran down his face and he knelt in front of Swill and embraced him.

Eugene blinked, unsure if what she was seeing was real. All the

Wolves held their collars in their hands or stared at collars on the ground in front of them.

"Owen! Pops!" Wren shouted from behind her.

Eugene watched Wren run to Swill and Owen and hug them both before pulling away and pressing her hands to Swill's wound.

Human soldiers dropped their swords and arrows on the ground. Some clasped their Wolf companions, but some ran away only to be chased by Wolves free to choose their own fates.

"You did it," CC said.

Eugene looked over at CC sitting on the ground next to her. Each still gripped Ol'Sassi's great staff with white knuckles. "We did it."

Eugene pulled herself to her feet using the staff for balance and finally removed one hand from it to help CC stand. The cloak over her shoulders slipped, but a hand reached out and pulled it back into place.

"Thanks," Eugene said.

Lucrid bowed. "The least I could do for the legendary Painted Wolf."

THE DAY WAS HOT, but as the afternoon wore on, a soft breeze blew, cooling them and the horses leading the carts. Lucrid halted when the Wolves scouting ahead reported another pack heading their way, but none of them wore collars. They came to see the Painted Wolf.

"Might as well make camp," said Lucrid. "This lot looks as hungry as the last."

"I will see if any require my attention," Mandrake said as he dismounted. "Come, Ari. You said you wanted to learn."

CC jumped off the back of the wagon. "He seems different—Mandrake, I mean."

Carnelian laughed, which startled her.

“Will you stop sneaking up on me? You’re as bad as the vamps.”

Carnelian turned his face toward hers and smiled, then winked his hot coal eye. “Sneaking: it’s what I do.”

“It’s your red hair, CC.” Teaser sat on the ground leaning against a tree. He stretched and then shook his head. “All these Wolves joining us, the High Coven, and even the Humans of the High Meadow must know of your existence by now.”

“Words fly faster than Wolves run,” grunted Carnelian. He squatted on the ground with his back to CC and Teaser. “Never seen a red human. Won’t be my last. I’ll make certain.”

Eugene nudged CC with her elbow. “You’ve got a new friend.”

They sat on top of a hill under the canopy of trees. Eugene stretched out her long legs and twisted her back so the Wolves sitting behind her could see her tattoos. The clothes Wren provided allowed her to show off her back and midriff much as she did at home. Wren had even shown her how to tie her leggings in a loose fashion to show off her tattooed legs. She smiled as she clasped a cup of water and admired the roses on the back of her right hand, never happier to see her own tattoos.

“You’ve got more fans,” CC said with a little nod to the Werewolves sitting behind Eugene, staring at her. She placed Ol’Sassi’s staff between them and turned to Teaser. “You’re sure this didn’t free all the Werewolves? All the ones we’ve seen since the attack didn’t have collars.”

Eugene—relieved to see CC’s red hair and freckles, but mostly to no longer hear her wheezing—shook her head. “Wish I knew.”

“I don’t think it works everywhere all at once,” Ari said, but stopped as everyone turned to watch him take a seat near Teaser. “Logically speaking, if it were that easy, someone would have done it already. I mean, from what you said, the Witches can’t control the Wolves unless they put that collar on them.”

“So, what now?” asked Eugene. “We can’t just sit here knowing how to free the Wolves and not free the rest.”

“And neither of you,” Lucrid said, looking between CC and

Eugene, “can enter the High Meadow.”

“We’re going to do all we can to help them.” Ari’s cheeks almost turned pink beneath their pale blue hue as Teaser and Mandrake both turned to him. Even Carnelian turned to sneer. “I mean, that’s the whole point of me and Arika coming home, isn’t it? Bringing peace back to the Wildes.”

Mandrake grumbled, “Nothing is ever as simple as it seems.”

“Indeed not,” Teaser added. “But, our Ringleader wants peace, thus are we on this expedition to meet with the High Coven. For now, the Witches cannot use magic to find us as we rest or travel.” He narrowed his eyes at Mandrake. “Is that not correct?”

Mandrake wrinkled his nose, but hissed, “You are correct. Although, they know or will know soon what has happened this day.”

Eugene turned and winked as a Wolf walked behind her letting his tail tickled her back.

“Politics aside,” CC said, poking Eugene’s arm. “I don’t know how we freed the Werewolves or how we turned back into ourselves, or—”

“How you freed them,” Eugene corrected her.

CC shook her head. “No, Eugene. I was angry at all the fighting and, well, everything. I gripped the staff to keep from falling when someone ran past me. That’s when it started; it was like my anger ran out of the earth and through me. The collars didn’t come off until you grabbed the staff, too.”

“Oh.” Eugene turned to Teaser. “How did we do it?”

“Was it Troll magic?” asked Ari. “It is a Troll’s staff, and you told me Trolls were the first people of the Wilds to understand and use magic.”

Mandrake spit the water he was drinking on the ground. “Absurd! Everyone knows Goblins came upon the Heart of Mother in the year of—”

“Technicalities,” Lucrid said, waving his hand. “Does it matter who used magic first? What are we going to do with these two?” He

pointed at CC and Eugene. “Neither can walk around looking the way they do. There’ll be a high price on their heads by now.”

A Wolf sitting behind Lucrid growled. The morning air, once humming with birdsong, filled with answering growls. Wren placed her hand on the hilt of her knife as her eyes narrowed.

“I’m not going to collect it!” shouted Lucrid.

Eugene rolled her eyes. “Everybody relax. We were already on our way to the High Meadow, and nobody is turning in anybody. We know what we’re doing.” She sat up straight and mumbled, “Sort of.”

The growling quieted and birdsong once again filled the air, but Wren’s eyes remained fixed on Lucrid.

Claude, who sat next to her, nodded at Lucrid “You come from over the mountains, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Lucrid said.

“Oh,” issued from many mouths as one, and all eyes on the hill turned to stare at him.

“Ash,” Claude said, grinning, “and walnuts. You stink of them.”

Lucrid’s face blanched for the briefest moment, and then he roared with laughter as he ran his hand through his hair. “An old recipe to die hair black. I’d hoped if anyone smelled it, they’d just think me vain. It’s better to stink of hair dye than to use magic to cover red hair. Witches look for those kinds of spells. I’ll give you a bottle, Grandmother.”

“Is that what I’ve been smelling?” CC wrinkled her nose. “No thanks. I’ll take my chances. And stop calling me that. We’re the same age.”

“I kind of like the smell,” Eugene said as Wren nodded her agreement.

“None of this matters,” said Mandrake. He stood and glanced first at Teaser, then fixed his gaze on CC. “The Witches know Wolves are free. Spells are broken. Add to that rumors of the Painted Wolf, the return of the twins, our approach to the High Meadow, and a woman with red hair. If we are to save Mother and

all the Wildes, plans—serious plans—must be made to not only protect these two, but to protect our Ringlets."

"Ringlets…I still don't like that word."Ari turned to Lucrid and lowered his voice. "How did you get over the mountains? Did you come on a dragon?" Ari's eyes widened. "Mandrake said that's where the dragons are."

Teaser shook his head. "Someone would have noticed a dragon."

Lucrid shrugged, but smiled at Ari. "Your friend is right. Discretion is my ally on this side of the mountains. I walked. Besides, no dragon would take me."

Teaser scratched his chin. "How do you communicate with your people?"

"Not magic," Lucrid said. "Too easily intercepted."

Mandrake huffed. "Only by the most practiced and skilled."

"True," Lucrid said, nodding, "but I'm human. Relays and codes are slow, but secure. Yes, they're old fashioned, but they serve us well."

"So your people know what's happening," said Claude. "Can they get word to the Wolves who fled to the mountains? Let them know they can return home?"

Lucrid shrugged. "It's been so long. Do you think they'll want to?"

"Of course they will," said Wren. "Familial bonds don't vanish."

Lucrid shook his head. "Is there any point? If Mother's Heart is broken?"

Mandrake replied in a voice so sad Eugene had to stare at him. "So much depends on what happens at the next Alignment."

"Ol'Sassi said we didn't have a lot of time," said Eugene. "I've lost count of the days we've spent on the road."

"Seven," said CC. "I've counted seven days."

"More than that, CC," said Teaser. "You said when you left Ol'Sassi she told you that you had twenty-four days until the alignment. There are five days left."

"You slept a lot," Eugene whispered.

CC shook her head and mumbled, “I’m so going to visit my grandmother when we get home.”

No one spoke. Those listening from outside the circle felt the breeze stir, and swore a chill fluttered through their hair.

Ari stood, breaking the silence. “First, we need to get Arika away from the High Coven. She and I are the ones who can make the bond ensuring alignment. Besides, if our aunt here is anything like the one at home, who knows what Arika’s being told?”

Everyone stared at him, even Mandrake. Ari’s cheeks flushed.

Teaser nodded. “He speaks truth."

CC stood as wrapped her cloak tight around her. “It’s cold. Another magic-related weather change?”

The sky darkened; storm clouds bellowed above them louder and louder, covering the blue sky until darkness seeped in all around them. The ground shook. Lightning flashed, striking the ground on the hill next to their camp. Clouds swirled, forming a tornado, but spinning the wrong way. The Wolves let loose howls, barks, and growls, before running toward the smoke.

Eugene doubled over, her insides tightening and twisting. “This is no fight for Wolves,” she whispered again and again until her Wolf calmed down and her head cleared. “Teaser, what is this?”

The Wolf leading the charge toward the spinning clouds snapped their teeth as a figure wrapped in smoke rose and rose until it towered over the trees. Others skidded and turned away from the giant figure spreading its arms wide. The Wolves circled the hill, while a small group ran up it to defend Eugene and CC.

“Stand where you are!” Mandrake shouted as he pushed himself in front of Ari and CC.

The right arm of the shadowed figure pointed at the group on the hill as its other arm pointed up. Lightning zoomed down the left arm and out of the right, but Mandrake raised his hand and the lightning returned to the giant shadow.

A gale pushed those standing to the ground, but the Werewolves dug their claws into the ground and howled in return. Ari was the

first to return to his feet, stopping Mandrake from hitting the ground. He turned, running toward the figure growing larger and larger until he matched the height of the figure and stepped over the Werewolves running toward the figure.

"No, Ari!" Mandrake running after him..

Teaser followed close behind him. "Ari, stop!"

CC plunged Ol'Sassi's staff into the ground and reached her other hand out to Eugene. As soon as both their hands touched the staff, it hissed and glowed. A green light, the color of life itself, surrounded them.

Lucrid pulled himself to CC's feet and reached for her. "You can't! He's too strong."

CC shrugged. "We have to try something."

Eugene grinned as a trickle of blood ran down her chin from where she'd bitten her lip. "This is wicked." She pointed the top of the staff toward the figure. CC nodded.

"Come on, Wolf," Eugene whispers. "Who's more powerful? You or him?"

The anger of her Wolf ran up her spine as the scene before her quieted. Her breath slowed her heartbeat even as her body tensed. Eugene stood ready to fight.

"Peace," CC's voice whispered in her ear.

Eugene opened her eyes. CC's soft cheeks were relaxed under all her freckles, her red hair whipped about in the wind, and her breathing was even and slow; all of it calmed Eugene's Wolf, and she joined in CC's meditation for peace.

So engrossed in the meditation, Eugene didn't see Teaser and Mandrake running towards Ari, still a giant, facing the clouded figure.

Eugene felt the warmth of the sun on her skin and heard a stream trickling over rocks, then a low, slow, masculine song. She opened her eyes; the feelings spread from the staff in a growing wave of green and gold, flowing as if there was no wind blowing and pushing against her. She watched it surround Ari, flowing

through him and along his arms as he held up his hands against the attacking figure.

The figure screamed, but the winds carried it away, surrounding it with sound green and gold softening until it was a gentle hush. The smoke and clouds containing the figure billowed until they let loose all the rain they carried. The figure held up both its arms, shrieking again. Ari turned, covering Teaser and Mandrake with his body as the clouds parted and the figure sprinkled away.

Rain fell, drenching every person, Goblin, Wolf, animal, plant, tree, and stone until it stopped, leaving large puddles around them as the sun burst through the clouds. The Wolves shook themselves off, and the puddles around them turned to mud in the great gouges their claws had made in the earth while they attempted to remain standing. Ari, back to his normal size, helped Teaser and Mandrake to their feet.

Teaser shook water from the fur and hair on his head. “Never run into a fight like that again.”

Mandrake, smoothing his long hair with his hands, nodded, but his mouth hung open. “My cousin showed great courage, and the heart of a true Ringleader.”

He turned to look at CC and Eugene still standing on the hilltop with the staff in their hands. Ari and Teaser stopped trying to dry off and turned to stare at them, too.

Mandrake cleared his throat and said, “Of course, it also demonstrates Teaser’s instructional techniques are truly lacking. I will take over tutoring my cousin now. As Ari and Teaser stared at him, he added, “We must move. There is no doubt that the Witches know where we are.”

“If it was they who attacked,” muttered Teaser.

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CHAPTER 8

Escapes and Near Misses: Las Vegas

Isabella

Isabella is wiped on a barstool, watching Frank squirm as he spoke with his wife on the phone.

"Yes," Frank said, waving to Marcus, who was stretched on the sofa across from him. "He's right here. We're—"

Marcus bit his lip, clearly trying not to laugh.

"I know," Frank said, pressing the phone so hard against his ear his hair stood up straight above his ear. "He's a grown man. If he wants to go hang out with folks his own age, who am I to—? Jasmine, please. He's fine. I'm fine. We're having a great time."

Cesar walked into this office, looked at Frank, shook his head, and sat at his desk. Happy followed.

"Talk to him yourself." Frank tossed the phone to Marcus. "Tell your aunt you're having a fun and safe time in Vegas. She doesn't believe me."

Jasmine's voice shouted so loud into the phone, everyone in the room heard, regardless of who had unhuman ears and who didn't. "Of course I believe you, but you know how protective Jackie is."

"Hi, Aunt Jasmine," Marcus said. "Tell Mamma I'm having a good time. We both are, and we're staying out of trouble. And you two are supposed to be relaxing at the spa and not worrying about us."

Isabella reached over and squeezed Frank's shoulder. Her fingers felt only tension in his muscles, but Frank waved her away as he rubbed his temple with his other hand.

"What possessed the two of you to run off to Vegas, Marcus?" Jasmine persisted. "You're up to something. I can tell when he's lying to me."

"Frank," whispered Isabella, "you really are a bad liar."

"Look, the opportunity to come to Vegas happened so fast, we didn't have time to consult the whole family on it," Marcus said. "Besides, I thought you trusted me to know what's right and what's not."

Isabella grinned. "Ouch! The kid knows how to hit home."

"Of course you do," said his aunt. "It's just—"

"Here's Frank." Marcus handed the phone back to Frank.

"Jasmine, my love," Frank said, "I told you this was partly for business. In fact, Happy just got here, so I need to go."

"Happy's there?"

"Yes. I love you, hon, but I really have to go…yes…yes." Frank sighed. "Marcus says he loves you, too. Bye, love you more." As soon as he hung up, Frank pointed at Marcus. "We need to make sure our stories are straight before I talk to her again."

Marcus nodded, and Isabella barely held back from laughing out loud.

"I thought you said she was out of town."

Cesar typed on a keyboard on his desk. Behind him, a large screen turned on and the outline of the High Meadow Casino appeared.

"She is, but Jackie called Luna, who let slip we were in Vegas. Jackie told Jasmine, and so on and so forth," said Frank.

Marcus shook his head. "Mamma's going to be pissed I left Luna on her own."

Frank smiled. "Don't worry, I'm the one in the doghouse." He turned to Happy. "No offense. Besides, Luna said she was staying with CC."

Marcus shook his head. “Mamma will find out CC’s not there.”

“All the more reason to stay on topic.” Cesar cleared his throat. “Happy, do you know where Mrs. Smith is keeping Phin and Jonesy?”

“Been thinking about that. They’re in one of two places.” Happy pointed at the image of the hotel. “Either in her private rooms, which are pretty much untouchable, or the floor below the service level, equally untouchable.”

“No place is untouchable,” Isabella said as she sat next to Marcus.

“Getting into the casino won’t be a problem,” Cesar said, nodding at her. “How well do you know the tower, Happy?”

“Well enough,” said Happy. “She approached me when she moved to town about working for her. That was the first I’d heard about Wolves taking over security at the casinos. I’ve been in and out maybe a dozen times since then. Always on business, how the PD fit into hotel security, the latest in technology for the human floors, and who to trust in the Wolf community. Two years ago, she brought in Upton. That was the last time I was there until they got that damn collar on me.”

“Not all Wolves collared,” said Cesar.

“That doesn’t mean they’re willingly working for her,” said Happy. “Whole families are here because Vegas provides good living and plenty of room to run and hunt. If a patriarch or matriarch is collared, the rest of the family does what they’re told.”

“I thought that might be the case,” said Cesar. “But some, like Upton, serve voluntarily. What makes them loyal?”

Happy growled. “Scum floats.”

“True,” Cesar said, nodding, “we have our share. We need to let the families know what’s going on—that things are changing.”

“I can help you with that,” Happy said. “Cesar, most of us moved to this town because it was a free city, like what you have in Austin. Most of us won't trust easily again, but they’ll trust me once they see I don’t have that thing on my neck.”

“I’ll leave that to you, but be careful,” Cesar warned. “She’ll come after you, but to kill this time. She’ll need to make an example out of you.”

Happy nodded. “I know. I can take care of myself, especially once a few more collars come off.”

“Luckily, we have Marcus to help with that.” Cesar grinned. “We’re down a Goblin Wizard, but not out.”

Isabella stood and cleared her throat. “Marcus needs to hold back—”

“Why?” Marcus jumped to his feet and glared at her.

“She’s got a point,” said Frank.

Isabella turned, unable to hide her surprise. “You see it, too?”

“What?” shouted Marcus.

“You’re worn out,” said Frank. “Admit it. You can barely hold yourself up.”

Isabella bit her tongue, unsure if this was the right time to bring up the green light or that little blip she’d heard in his heartbeat. Twisting her head to look at each of their faces, she made up her mind. “He’s right. I’ve been with you after you removed a collar. Your heart,” she hesitated and looked at Cesar, who nodded for her to go on. “Your heart beats so fast and so hard while you're doing your thing. Last time, you passed out. And there’s this blip I keep hearing whenever you do magic.”

“I’m fine,” said Marcus. “Yes, it wears me out, but you’re there to keep me safe.”

“Oh.” Isabella sat down and folded her hands on her lap. “I didn’t think you realized…gosh, if I could spontaneously blush, I’m sure I’d be red now.”

Marcus took her hands in his. “Jonesy told me this might happen until he can give me some real training.” He looked at Cesar. “Until then, Isabella and Frank help keep me safe and well.”

Isabelle looked at Frank; his cheeks burned a bright pink.

“I don’t get it,” said Happy.

“It’s all about magic,” said Cesar. “Marcus has talent in that

direction."

"I'll be damned," said Happy. "I thought it was some kind of tech."

Cesar stood, moved to the front of his desk, and took his time meeting every eye in the room. "Who do you think you're working with? Marcus, you had—what—thirty minutes from Jonesy before you figured out how to free the Wolves. Jonesy had to do a lot of convincing before I let him leave the Cave. We both knew they'd make a play for him. We're all risking our lives, but not foolishly. Now, Frank, Marcus, please go. Rest while you can. I have work to do."

As Frank and Marcus left, Cesar settled behind his desk and Happy stretched his long legs out in front of him.

Isabella winked at him. "How is it you take up so much room?"

He grinned. "How do you survive being so tiny?"

She laughed and sat on the couch next to him. "You're okay by me." Turning her attention to Cesar, she said, "So, what's the plan for Happy?"

Cesar folded his arms before answering. "You're okay not seeing your family for a little while longer?"

"Not what I want to do," Happy said, and Isabella put her hand on his arm as the ache in his voice passed over her. "But it's what I have to do. All I do is for them."

"Your kids—"

Happy held up his hand. "Not Wolves, but they understand."

"Good." Ramon tapped on his phone. "Sorry, Cesar. It's almost time. The car's ready."

"You don't know where you are," said Cesar, "I'm going to keep it that way for the time being. But first, You know Jonesy better than do. Will he talk?"

Happy shook his head. "Can't say. I know him on sight, but that's it. He's always around and often speaks for Mrs. Smith, but we've never said more than a few words to each other. Never had a reason to trust or not trust him." Happy leaned forward. "But, I've

seen him with the kids a few times. He loves'em." Cesar shook his head, and Happy added, "I'm a father. It's easy for me to see. He won't do anything that could hurt them."

"Good enough for me," Isabella said. "I like Jonesy."

"I kind of do, too," said Ramon.

Everyone turned to look at him.

"You do?" Isabella asked.

Ramon shrugged. "He's got a funny way of talking, but he always means what he says."

"Okay," said Cesar. "I want to trust him to not willingly cause harm, but the kids aren't here right now. Let's assume he can hold off talking. Mrs. Smith may have assumed he took your collar off. But, by now, she knows another Wolf is walking around without a collar. She'll suspect we've got a magic user."

Happy stood, but his shoulders drooped. "Can you make me forget Marcus's role in all this? It's got to be done if I leave here."

Cesar smiled. "If I could, I wouldn't. I want you to tell everyone you meet about everything you've seen and done. We have a young Wizard with us. Use his name. Tell everyone to use his name, but make sure you also tell everyone that he's human."

Happy's shoulders rolled back as he laughed. "She'll never believe it. The old Witch despises humans."

"That's what I'm banking on." Cesar once again put the image of the High Meadow Casino on the screen behind his desk and tapped a button on his phone. "Maura, will you come in? Happy, you said there were no humans above the thirtieth floor. Maura worked security at the hotel. She's been up there."

Maura entered without a sound and walked around the desk, pointing to the top floors of the casino. "I used to make rounds up here when the kids were at school. They're sealed tight. No Wolves walked those floors until Upton showed up. Once he and his friends arrived, they took over securing the floors." She turned to look at Happy. "Mrs. Smith didn't let Wolves with collars on those floors. The young Wolf I was telling you about said he's been up there. I'm

guessing with the twins gone, she's changing things up."

"That'll be Phineas's doing," said Ramon. "Mrs. Smith needs to keep a tighter leash on them."

"And with Happy out of her control," said Isabella, "she's got to be having kittens."

"I hope so," said Happy. "When I get my claws into her—"

"For now, let's get you on the streets." Cesar raised his eyebrow at Happy. "You're sure? Mrs. Smith will send everything she's got at you."

Happy grinned as his eyes glassed over.

Isabella whistled. "Remind me never get on your bad side."

"Let's do this, Cesar."

Cesar nodded. "Maura will take you out and be your driver. She's almost as good as Issy. She'll also coordinate with Ramon if you get the chance to grab any friends with collars."

Isabella stared at Maura. "You want to be out there?"

Maura rolled her eyes. "I hate being underground."

"She's got her own protection," Cesar said, wiggling his fingers.

Ramon and Isabella both said, "Oh."

Happy looked to Isabella, and she whispered, "It's a magic thing. Guess she's been taking lessons." Raising her voice, she turned to Cesar, wiggling her own fingers. "Hey, when you going to teach me how to do that thing you do with shadows?"

Cesar shook his head.

"Come on, Happy," said Maura. "Ramon, you drive us out."

Isabella remained sitting with her arms folded until Cesar pointed to the door. "Fine, but you'll show me soon, right?"

EVERYBODY GATHERED around a table in the Speakeasy as the morning crew set up for the day. Shirley fed Frank and Marcus a huge breakfast.

"You're looking better, Marcus," Isabella said, sitting next to

him.

“Slept like a log,” he replied between bites. “Thanks, Shirley. These eggs are great.”

“I’ll tell Mikail,” She stood to leave as Cesar and Ramon joined them, Cesar motioned her to stay.

“You think the Goblins you sent after Phin are getting in?” Frank asked, leaning back in his chair and sipping coffee with more ease than Isabella had seen in him since he arrived.

“Of course,” said Cesar. “They can get in just about anywhere. Getting Phin out is the problem.”

“Why did you hire Goblins?” asked Marcus.

Isabella giggled, but it was Shirley who answered. “You put out the contract?” She grinned at Cesar before turning back to Marcus. “Cesar didn’t *hire* Goblins. He put out a contract for Phin. Goblins are good at smash-and-grabs, especially if there’s a heavy bounty.”

“Which means Mrs. Smith can’t risk sending Phin out of the casino. She knows the Goblins will make a grab for him,” Marcus said, nodding in approval.

“It’s a risk,” said Cesar, “but worth it. A free Phineas is more of a threat to the old witch’s control over the Wolves than a confined Phineas.”

“Hold on,” said Frank. “You think she’ll kill him rather than lose him?”

“To prevent us getting him?” Cesar shrugged. “It’s what I would do. Our biggest problem is that collar. He might resist it, but it’s still on him. Goblins won’t try to take him with that around his neck.”

Frank scratched his chin. “So, we’re back to our original problem.”

“You mean getting me into the tower and to Phin?” said Marcus.

“Not going to happen,” Isabella and Frank said at the same time.

“Sorry, Marcus,” said Cesar. “I have to agree with them. We can’t afford that. You’re not skilled enough in magic to take on Mrs. Smith.”

Marcus laughed. “No way I'm taking her on. I just need to get close to Phin. Like you said, Goblins won’t even try to grab him with the collar around his neck, and I’m the only one you know who can take it off.”

“No.” Frank stood. “If anyone is even considering this, I’m out.” He looked down at Marcus. “You’re my family, and I’m not telling your mother I lost her other—”

Marcus smiled and put his hand on Frank's shoulder. “That was a long time ago, and you didn’t lose my brother. You showed me how to fight. I’m doing this.” He turned to Cesar. “Can the Goblins get me into the casino?”

“Us,” Frank corrected. “Can they get *us* into the casino?”

Frank

Marcus leaned against the limo straightening the brim of his hat. “You okay with this?”

Frank shrugged and closed the passenger door. “Can’t say I’m thrilled about it. What are Goblins like, generally speaking? The only one I’ve met is Jonesy, but you've worked with Cobalt. How do they compare?”

Marcus sniffed. “They’re particular about how things are done. Make sure to say what Cesar told you exactly the way he told you to say it. I know it sounds weird, but…” Marcus grinned wide. “They’re here.”

Frank tugged on his cuffs and cleared his throat. As he turned, he almost stumbled over a short, red Goblin. For a creature no taller than Frank’s middle, it took up an enormous amount of space. Its gut rivaled Frank’s, but was disproportionately smaller than its chest. The Goblin looked at him through tiny button eyes that burned like coals on a grill. A long, pointed nose pierced with many gold rings twitched as though smelling him. Long ears, pierced with so many gold rings, they flopped down into curly, red hair on top of a round face, broken only by the long nose and an equally long,

pointed chin. The only things glowing redder than its eyes were the glittering red suit and equally glittering gold vest.

"You the human I'm supposed to meet?"

The Goblin's voice grumbled like a truck's wheels on a gravel road, and its mouth puckered around long, broken teeth—all except for two sharp front teeth that had been dipped in gold and decorated with red jewels.

Frank rolled his shoulders back and said in his thickest Texas drawl, "All depends. Who're you?"

The Goblin sniffed, then spat. "Wise guy. I can smell a deceitful human a mile away."

The two Goblins behind the glittering one snickered. One of them spat.

Frank pulled his badge out. "No wise guy: I'm the law in this world. Are we here to commence a deal, or break bonds and bring shame?"

The Goblin's eyes widened, then narrowed. It lifted its nose at Frank's identification and sniffed. "Real…impressive. Didn't think the vamp spoke true."

Frank nodded to Marcus, who got out of the limo and opened the trunk, pulling out an overnight bag. Frank took the bag and laid it on the ground.

"We doing this?" he asked, pointing to the inside of the bag.

"Not for two buttons," the Goblin snarled.

"Deal's a deal," said Frank. "Two gold buttons: a high price for so simple a journey."

The Goblins sniffed in unison. "No. The Witch is too powerful for Goblin magic. Others made it in. Didn't come out."

Marcus nodded to Frank, who cleared his throat, straightened his, and then crossed his arms over his chest "Ringleader Remie, if you want to renegotiate, all involved must be present."

Remie's lips parted, letting all his sharp, white teeth gleam under the overhead streetlights. "A human who knows the rules." Remie stroked its chin. "The tower is a sacred space. Our contracts

ban violence on sacred spaces."

Frank leaned down until he could meet Remie's eyes and repeated the words Cesar made him memorize. "This is truth, but violence is being done there. To add injury to your attempts to renegotiate, this human, with whom you now speak, has an enlightened kinsman who carries Mother's Song in his heart and in his voice."

Remie stepped back and twisted his thick neck to look behind him as if it expected to be attacked. The two behind it did the same, and then each put their hands inside their jackets as through they were movie gangsters.

"None spoke of this to me," Remie murmured. "Changes from previous negotiations may prove most unfavorable, as expectations of the settled reward have grown in value."

"The gratitude of a Wizard, my nephew by my marriage to his matriarch's kin, who may one day rule in such a place as this," Frank paused and waved his hands to indicate the city, "is fine payment for such a simple task to one as gifted as yourself."

Remie squinted and pursed his lips. "You are only a human. You claim kinship to a human who can sing, but not to the Werewolf we suspect is your true reason for entering a most sacred space. Why does one such as you—though, speaking with the greatest respect—desire this contract with Goblins. You have no familiarity with a being who is not your kin?"

Frank leaned forward as though to whisper in the Goblin's ear. "Who but Mr. Vegas himself would dare to steal a mere Werewolf from the fabled seat of power known as the High Meadow Casino?" Frank nodded and winked at Ringleader Remie. "And who am I to question the motives of those unknown to me?"

Remie's face burst into a grin so wide Frank was sure its head would fall off even as laughter rolled out of its mouth like a landslide. "I like this human! Not as dumb as most of its kind." It turned and nodded to the two Goblins, and with a snap of its fingers, each stepped into the overnight bag, shrinking to doll size.

Remie bowed to Frank, pointing to the bag. “If you are ready to proceed.”

Frank peeked inside the bag, unable to see the other two Goblins. “As ready as I’m ever going to be.”

He lifted his foot to step inside the bag and closed his eyes, holding tightly to his hat. When he opened his eyes, he was on his feet and sinking into a crumpled shirt. He would have fallen into its folds, but Remie’s hand gripped his shoulder and pulled him to his feet.

Looking up, Remie shouted, “An easy ride, driver, if you would be so kind.”

Darkness closed in around Frank as the lid of the bag came down on them. The sound of the zipper closing echoed around him. The contents shifted as the bag was placed upright. Frank wobbled and almost fell, but once again, Remie’s grip on his shoulder shifted his body until he was sitting between the Goblins.

“Chocolate!” exclaimed a Goblin.

“With nougat!” shouted the other.

All three laughed, and Frank heard paper tearing. A red ball of light grew from the faintest of dots into a soft, warm glow. Frank rubbed his eyes as they adjusted to the strange light. When he reopened them, Frank saw he and the Goblins sat in a circle, and the Goblins each held a chunk of the candy bar they gobbled with glee.

Remie lifted one hand to Frank. “You provide an excellent feast, human. I approve of you. Eat.”

“I second the approval,” said one of the other Goblins.

“I, too, agree,” said the last one.

Remie pointed to its companions and said between mouthfuls, “Hazel and Ruby.”

Frank took the chunk of mostly nougat from Remie and said, “Enjoy the journey while we can, friends. That’s my motto.”

Frank leaned back, glad he’d listened to Cesar and lined the bag with the softest, cleanest shirts. “It even smells good in here.”

Remie stopped chewing only long enough for a quick sniff. “Vamps, humans, and Wolves: all of you stink, but the lavender is a pleasant touch.”

Frank sighed, making a mental note to thank Shirley for the potpourri.

After Remie licked his lips and claws clean, he began singing under his breath, “I’ll be with you in apple blossom time…”

“DON’T DO IT, HUMAN,” Remie grumbled, hovering near Frank’s bent form as Ruby rubbed Frank’s back.

“Give him a break, Remie,” Hazel mumbled, leaning against the mirror. “He’s just a human. What did you expect?”

Frank, still clutching his stomach, pushed himself to half standing. “I’m fine. As long as I don’t open my eyes all the way, I’m okay. Where are we?”

“A lot of good you are walking around half blind. We’re in the mirrors—for the umpteenth time.” Remie pushed Hazel out of the way and peered through the mirror. “Everything you see is the opposite. Now, I need you to identify your kin.”

Frank smiled a thanks to Ruby as the Goblin helped him stand. “I got this.” He moved to the wall of mirrors and opened his eyes all the way. The casino stretched out before and below him. The walls were covered with diamond-shaped mirrors peeking out of green, velvet curtains and on top of green velvet wallpaper. Gold vines wove between the mirrors and curtains, and from their golden leaves, gold birds with bejeweled eyes spread their wings as if to fly to another vine. Frank dared look to his left and right, only to find the inside of green velvet curtains. He sighed.

They stood between the slots section of the casino floor and the blackjack tables. Cigarette smoke wafted first in thin tendrils, then in soft clouds up to hanging crystal lights mingling with the thin tubes of air intakes. The closer Frank leaned toward the glass, the

more he could hear the ringing of the slot machines, the calls of the dealers, the music, and the voices on the floor, but as though he were miles away.

Frank looked straight down once and saw the top of a woman's head as she leaned close to the mirrored wall reapplying her lipstick. He was at least ten feet above her head, and looking down caused the room to spin. He lifted his eyes and stared straight ahead.

"I don't see him," Frank said. "If it's his choice, he'd be at the blackjack tables."

Remie scratched its chin. "Not good. Witch will offer him a gift."

Hazel cleared its throat. "Poker tables, high-stakes: she'll make the offer there."

Remie nodded. "Yes, that's what I'd do." He looked up at Frank. "You ready?"

Frank felt his stomach turn at the thought of traveling through the mirrors again. "Not much choice is there? Let's do it."

"Don't worry, Frankie," said Ruby. "It gets easier for you, or so I'm told. I've never actually brought a human through rock or mineral before."

Frank turned to Remie, feeling his spirits lift a little. "Easier?"

Remie shrugged. "Like I would know?"

"You want us to stick with you, boss?" asked Hazel.

Remie shook its head. "Time is not our friend here. You find the Werewolf with the lovely bounty. We'll meet you below."

Hazel and Ruby nodded, turning their backs to Frank. What he assumed was a black wall seemed to flutter, as if his eyes were blinking too fast. Hazel and Ruby faded into the wall, disappearing. Frank rubbed his eyes.

"I'm never going to get used to that," he muttered. He rubbed his stomach, realizing it no longer churned. "Come on, Remie."

Remie laughed and wrapped its long, gnarled fingers filled with gold rings around Frank's arm. "Easy-peasy."

Remie started humming "Summer Wind," and Frank hummed

along as everything around him grew fuzzy. His stomach lurched into his throat, but he drifted along to songs of Wayne Newton.

"YOU CAN OPEN your eyes now, Frankie. We're here."

Frank opened one eye, but saw only darkness.

Remie grunted and turned him to his left. "This way."

Frank opened both eyes; the room in front of him was smaller than the other one had been. The gold on the wallpaper shone brighter, the constant casino noises were subdued, and the people at the tables were almost stoic as they played their hands. He stood where he might have stood had he been on the actual floor, looking at the mirrored walls.

"Why can't anyone see us?" he asked.

"Too small, and who the hells wants to see your ugly mug when they look in a mirror?"

Frank shrugged. "Makes sense when you put it that way. I wouldn't want to see your mug. High roller section?"

The sound of pebbles gushing down a drain issued from Remie. Frank could only cringe at Remie's giggle. "Oh yes, best tables. See your kinsman?"

Frank leaned forward, peering across the floor, and grunted, "No." He stepped away from the mirror, shaking his head, but stopped and took a step to the left. "Can we go over a couple of mirrors?"

Remie nodded, and when it stopped, they were standing behind the back of a head pressed against the mirror. Remie put his index finger and thumb together, then flicked the back of the head. It lurched forward and shook as though its owner was waking up.

"This is Marcus." Frank grinned and let out a long sigh. "He made it."

Marcus glanced once at the mirror next to his head, rubbed his hand over the back of his hair, and lifted the edge of his cards.

“Royal flush!” shouted Remie. “He’s a goner. Look at his chips! The Witch will own him soon.”

Frank held his breath; the dealer was looking at Marcus, waiting. Marcus looked around. There were two other players at the table. Each glanced at Marcus, then returned to staring at nothing.

“Don’t do it,” whispered Frank.

“A fortune,” Remie said with such glee. Frank turned away just long enough to see Remie’s eyes gleam bright red. “Here it comes.” Remie put his hand on Frank’s shoulders. “I am sorry, friend. Your kin will accept and be bound to the Witch. "

Frank turned in time to see the dealer ask, “Cards, sir?”

Frank held his breath as Marcus looked at his cards once more and shook his head. Even from the side of Marcus’s head, Frank could read his lips. “Fold.”

“Yes!” shouted Frank.

“I’ll be a worm in twenty lives if I ever see that again,” muttered Remie.

“Told you he was smart,” Frank said, grinning so wide he thought his face might split. “Never take a gift from a Witch.”

Nodding, Remie patted Frank’s shoulder. “A proud uncle I see in front of me, and rightly so. Perhaps your kin will indeed be a great Wizard, but now, his true test comes.”

Frank followed Remie’s pointing finger and watched Marcus walk toward the main casino floor. Before he could leave the high roller section, a pair of hands reached out from behind the velvet curtains, grabbed Marcus’s shoulders, pulling him behind the curtain. Just before the curtain fell back in place, Frank caught Upton’s sneering face.

“Marcus!”

“I know now where the ugly Wolf will take him. Come.”

“Upton looked right at me,” said Frank.

“No,” Remie said, shaking its head. “Chance made him look this way ensuring no one observed him.”

“You sure you know where they’ll go?”

Remie grinned that huge grin that made the hair on Frank's arms stand up. "To the Witch. Where else? It will be a long trip. Hold on to your stomach. And when you stand again, you must be quiet. Mrs. Smith is very clever for a Witch, but this is my city. Mr. Vegas knows the right tricks to stay hidden."

After another jarring trip, Frank leaned against something cold, smooth, and solid. He placed his hand on his chest. The thump, thump, thump of his heart pressed and released against his ribs, reminding him he was alive. His stomach twisted and felt soft and squishy behind his belt buckle. He opened his eyes. Through a veil of darkness, a faint green light glowed. He looked up at Remie and opened his mouth, but Remie put a finger to its lips and pointed straight ahead just as a door opened.

Marcus fell into the room; a trickle of blood oozed down the side of his face. "What'd I do?"

His voice, though distant and muffled, didn't hold the desperation Frank expected.

"You tell me," said a woman's voice.

Frank craned his neck to look down as a woman in a dark green suit rounded a large, black desk. She leaned against it, staring down at Marcus.

"Mrs. Smith?" Frank mouthed.

Remie nodded as Marcus stood and dusted off the knees of his pants without looking at Mrs. Smith.

"Look, I don't know what you think I did, but I'm no cheat. Tell me—"

Upton punched him in the ribs, and when Marcus doubled over, Mrs. Smith reached down and turned his face up to look at hers.

"Are you a clever actor, or incredibly stupid. Which is it?"

Marcus rubbed his ribs. "I'm just in town to have a good time."

Upton kicked the back of his knees; even through the distance and the strange material they stood in, Frank heard the crack of his kneecaps hitting the marble floor. He lurched forward as if he could grab Upton, but his hand hit a cold, smooth surface.

Remie hissed, “No mirrors: steel. Only reflective surface we can see through here. She’ll hear us if she wants to.”

Upton lifted his arm to punch Marcus, but stopped as Mrs. Smith said, “That’s enough.” She picked up a wallet on her desk and pulled out a number of cards before glancing back at Marcus. “Tell me about yourself, Marcus LeBrere of Austin, Texas.”

Marcus braced his hand on the floor to lift himself, but stopped when Upton stepped closer to him. “Can I stand?”

Mrs. Smith nodded, but as soon as Marcus put weight on his feet, his face paled and his knees wobbled. He would have fallen, but Upton reached out and pushed him into a chair in front of the massive desk. Marcus shook off Upton’s grip.

“I don’t know what I can tell you that you’ll believe. I’m sorry I got involved in,” he waved his hand around, “whatever this is. I saw this guy,” he pointed at Upton., “at the Grand when I first got into town. The bartender pointed to him, said he was wanted by the cops, and was calling them.” He shook his head, then quickly added, “Me, I don’t like cops so much. All I did was warn him.”

Mrs. Smith leaned forward. Her expression remained unchanged. “Why?”

Marcus licked his lips and huffed a laugh. “My uncle’s a cop. Wanted a weekend away to bond or some such crap. I knew if I was around when cops showed up, he’d make a thing out of it.”

Mrs. Smith leaned back in her chair and sighed. “Make a thing?”

Marcus looked at Upton, then back to Mrs. Smith. “I mean, he’s no saint, but—”

Frank almost missed the nod Mrs. Smith gave to Upton, who slugged Marcus in the jaw.

Frank heard the crack of bones. Even Remie rubbed its chin.

“You’re a good liar, Mr. LeBrere,” she said, picking up his phone from her desk. “I just wanted to see what kind of human you were.” To Upton, she added, “Take him downstairs. See if our new friend can teach him to tell the truth.”

DARKNESS and the stench of decay hit Frank in the face. He dropped to his knees as his gut clenched. Once again, he emptied his stomach. When he stopped, cold air cooled the sweat on his brow, and the slightest of breezes carried the scent of wet earth.

"You done?" Remie's voice raked over his back like hot coals. "We don't have a lot of time."

"What the hell?" Frank asked as he pushed himself to his feet.

Remie's icy hand gripped his shoulders. Frank waited. In the heavy air, scratching, whining, and faint voices echoed from far away.

"My people found the Wolf," Remie breathed into Frank's ear, "but they can't get in. We've got to stop them from taking your kin to his cell."

"Walk!" Upton's voice, as cruel as he was ugly, echoed its way to them.

Someone, it had to be Marcus stumbled, then asked, "Where're we going?"

As he stood as still as he could, Frank's eyes adjusted to the dim light. He and Remie stood in a hall of shadows. Pinpricks of light pierced the blackness of a long tunnel made from broken concrete and rocks. Frank realized they stood in a side corridor facing a longer, wider corridor.

"You're going to see an old friend of yours," laughed Upton. "At least you better hope he's a friend. If not, you're dead."

Frank's heart pounded in his chest. He ran his tongue along his lips, but he had no saliva to moisten them.

Marcus's voice was strong, but fear leaked out just under his bravado. "I still don't get it. What I do?"

"Save it," snapped Upton. A metal bolt clanged in the silence. Rust and dirt crinkled through the air as a door was pushed. "Your friend's not eaten in a while, so good luck."

A door banged shut as Upton left the way he came laughing all

the way out of the tunnel.

Frank took in a deep breath and reached for Remie. “Once more unto the breach.”

“Or close the wall up with our dead,” replied Remie. “You’ll have to open the door.”

Frank followed Remie to an old, rusty door with a shiny, new steel bolt sealing it. Hazel and Ruby stood at least three feet away from the door.

“Go on,” Remie said, pushing Frank toward the door.

Frank turned to look down at the red Goblins. None of them moved closer to the door.

“What’s wrong?” he whispered.

“Duh! It’s spelled,” said Hazel.

“Against magic,” Ruby added.

“But not against humans…probably,” said Remie.

Frank shook his head and put his hand on the handle. It was still warm from Upton’s touch, but nothing else. There were no tinglings or vibrations that Frank expected. He slid the bold to the right, released it, and pulled the door open.

“Magic,” he muttered, rolling his eyes. “You didn’t even try to open it.”

Frank stepped into the cell. His toes caught on something soft, and he fell forward. He broke his fall with his hands but not before he hit the concrete floor with all his weight. Small rocks and dirt bit into his palms as his knees squished something that shouted, “Ow!"

Frank fumbled until he was sitting on his butt and removed his legs from around Marcus. “You okay? Are you hurt?"

“I was fine before you fell on top of me,” Marcus grumbled, pushing himself to a sitting position and rubbing his back. “What stinks?”

Under the acrid stink of stale air was a sickeningly sweet stench. Frank shuddered and coughed as the smell stuck in his throat. His stomach turned, but it was already empty. He patted Marcus on the shoulder, when he and Marcus both sat up and stared into the

darkest corner of the room as a soft, almost imperceptible growl slithered in the darkness towards them.

Frank held his breath as Marcus pushed away from him and sat up. “Hello?”

“Who’s there?” Frank called out.

Another growl answered. Closer. It moved toward them on padded feet. A red dot of light drifted in front of Frank’s eyes; he turned and nodded to Remie as the Goblins entered the cell, bent so they were almost walking on all fours, their coal-like eyes gleaming in the faint, red light as they searched the room.

Marcus rubbed his hands on his pants and tried to lift himself off the floor, but fell back to floor and rubbed his knees. Frank pushed himself up to help Marcus.

Something sniffed.

“It’s Phin,” whispered Marcus.

Frank nodded. “Could be.”

Marcus straightened his back. Taking a deep breath, he called out, “Phineas? It’s me, Marcus. Frank’s here, too. We’ve been looking for you.”

Silence answered him.

Marcus wobbled, but managed to stand with Frank’s help. Frank gripped his elbow and led him to a large block of concrete where he could sit.

Round globes reflecting the Remie’s red light glared down at them. Sweat ran down Marcus’ forehead and into his eyes, but Marcus didn’t wipe his eyes. The red disks blinked, and a growl rolled down from the hidden face and covered Frank with chills.

Frank called out, “Phin, take a good sniff. It’s us."

Only the tumble of rocks in front of them let Frank know to look up. A wolf, larger than any wolf Frank had ever seen, leaped onto a pile of broken concrete and rocks to their right.

“I got this,” said Marcus, raising his voice. “I can help you, but I’m hurt. You’re going to have to come to me.”

Frank raised his eyebrows and held his breath as a succession of

quick, short inhales drifted to them. When the sound stopped, Marcus let out his own breath.

“If you’re Phineas,” Marcus said, “then you know who we are.”

Growling answered, growing in intensity, followed by the dark shadow of a Wolf shifting from one front paw to the other until finally it stopped and howled a long, low song so filled with pain Frank felt it in his heart. Even Marcus even rubbed his chest as if it ached.

The Wolf leaped down with his head low, his ears focused on Marcus, while his eyes burned like flames.

Marcus squinted to see, but his breaths were calm and even. A smile formed on his lips as he reached out his hand. “I know it’s you, Phin.”

The wolf’s teeth, wet and white, glowed red. Great chunks of fur were missing from the wolf’s side. A black stain, ragged and matted, filled the wolf’s breast. Fresh blood trickled out from its edges. His injuries did nothing to diminish the fierceness of the wolf’s pose, his eyes, his teeth, or his hackles.

Frank shook his head as sweat poured into his eyes and tears ran out. “What have they done to you, Phin?”

Marcus grimaced as he leaned towards the Wolf and fell to his knees. The Wolf took a step backward, growling, but perhaps not as loud as it had been before.

“No,” Marcus said, pushing his legs to the side to crawl forward. “Don’t move away.”

The Wolf sat and once more howled. The sound filled Frank's ears until the ache of the call wrapped around him and he sat on the concrete block where Marcus had been sitting. The Wolf flopped onto its belly, its tongue lolling out the side of its mouth as it panted so loud it almost broke the echo of his howl.

Marcus grabbed the Wolf’s side. For an instant, a flash of light, perhaps white or green, enveloped them both. Frank had to avert his eyes from the light’s brightness.

While his eyes were still closed, Frank heard Marcus whisper,

“Change, Phin. I’ve done all I can.”

When Frank stopped rubbing his eyes and opened, Marcus lay on his back, panting and gripping the oppressive collar in his hands. Phin lay next to him, naked and bleeding, but alive and human.

How long Frank sat and stared, he wasn't sure, but the scratching of claws on stone as the red Goblins moved towards Phin and Marcus shocked Frank to action.

He rushed to lean over Marcus and shook him. “Wake up. We gotta go.”

Marcus pushed his hand away, muttering, “Ten more minutes, Luna, then I’ll drive you to class.”

“What’s a Luna?” Remie asked.

“His sister,” answered Frank.

“Weird name for a sister,” said Hazel. “Do we wait ten minutes, boss?”

“We don’t have ten minutes,” Ruby shouted from the doorway.

All of a sudden, Marcus sat up, his eyes wide and searching. He stretched and rubbed the back of his neck as he muttered, “I fell on a rock.”

“Awake,” said Remie. “Let’s go.”

“Uh,” began Marcus, but at the sound of a soft growl, he twisted around to see Phineas sitting on a block as Hazel rubbed a salve over a wound on his side. Marcus looked from Phin to Frank and back. “Phin? What happened? You look terrible.”

Phineas tried to smile, but his usual happy, plump cheeks were gray and sunken. Dark circles hung under each eye, and skin hung from his bones tattered with open cuts and bruises.

“I’ll be okay,” Phineas said. “Thank you, Marcus. Not sure how much longer I could’ve held out.”

Before Marcus could answer, Ruby picked up the collar that had been around Phineas’s neck. "Vile thing," it said, pulling the stone off the collar and squeezing it as if to crush it. Ruby threw it on the ground and spat on it. “We go now. Don’t get paid if you get caught again. You both can walk?”

Marcus nodded, but as he did, he swooned. Two hands wrapped with long, thin fingers like steel claws around each arm and lifted him to his feet. “Maybe with a little help.”

“I got the young one,” said Ruby.

Marcus pointed to Phineas. “He can’t walk out naked.”

Remie looked from Marcus to Phineas, scratching its head and blinking lashes like bristles. “Clothes? Hazel, you got human clothes?”

Hazel pushed away from Phineas and turned to face them all with its hands on its hips. “Do I look like a department store, boss?”

Remie shrugged its broad shoulders. “Won’t be seen… by many.”

“I’m fine,” Phineas said as he pushed himself to stand. He swayed and would have fallen over if Hazel hadn’t steadied him.

“Boss, no healing in the contract,” Ruby said.

“If we want to collect, we’ll have to do what we can in a hurry. Keep a tally, Ruby,” said Remie. It turned to look at Marcus, but then turned to Frank. “Why hasn’t he fixed himself?”

“I told you,” said Frank, “he’s learning. He hears the song. That’s all I know.”

“A Wizard in training,” interjected a familiar, deep, rumbling voice.

Frank spun around, reaching for his holster even as the Goblins positioned themselves around a boulder in the far corner of the cell. It wasn’t a boulder. The shape shimmered and swam before Frank’s eyes, forming shoulders and a torso. A head lifted as it rose up on short legs. Arms hanging heavily with chains attempted to lift as a deep grunt followed the figure standing fully on its two legs.

“Jonesy!” Frank pushed between Remie and Hazel toward his friend. “You’re alive!”

“Indeed. My thanks to you, Werewolf, for not devouring me.”

Phineas’s face broke into the smallest of grins and his voice was only a whisper compared to Jonesy’s as he replied, “No problem.”

“Frank,” Jonesy held up his shackled hands, “If you could

assist…”

Remie reached for the chains and pulled them down, bringing Jonesy back to his knees. “You’re not part of the contract. Stay here in stone.”

“Remie!” Frank shouted, pulling Jonesy’s arm to help him back to his feet.

“He can’t get them off,” Marcus said. “That’s why he won’t help. There's magic in the chains.”

Remie turned to Marcus, scratching its chin. “Not as stupid as it looks.”

Laugher erupted from deep within Frank’s gut. “This whole magic thing is a joke.”

“Frank—”

Frank ignored Marcus and pulled the bolts out of the shackles around Jonesy’s wrists and neck. They fell to the ground with a clang that echoed through the cells.

“You think if no one thought to prevent humans from entering the cell there’d be a spell on the shackles?” Frank shook his head. “Pay attention to the details, Marcus. You, too, Remie. The contract specifies a handsome reward for friends found and returned. Jonesy here is a close friend of mine and Cesar’s.”

“Humans,” Ruby muttered, lifting Phineas and moving him toward the door. “Bring the Trowl.”

No one stopped them as they made their way down the long, dark hallway until Frank put his hand on Remie’s shoulder.

“Are we going in the right direction?”

Remie snorted. “Now you have all the answers. You want to see the old witch?”

“No,” said Frank, “this is as close as I care to get, but do you think she’ll let these guys just walk out of the casino.”

“How did you find us?” Marcus asked before shrugging Frank’s hand off his arm. “I’m okay.”

Before anyone could answer, they arrived at the end of the hall. Remie put its hand on the wall, running a claw along some of the

cracks and chips in the concrete.

“Not again,” muttered Frank.

“Again?” asked Marcus.

“Ah,” said Jonesy, “a brilliant exit strategy, assuming you have a final destination.”

“Final destination?” said Marcus. “What does that mean?”

“You wanted to know how we found you," said Frank, feeling a lump forming in his stomach. Looking down at Remie, Frank asked, “I suppose through walls again is the only way.”

Marcus nodded. “Cool.” He lifted his hand to the wall near Remie’s. “It’s warm. We’re really going through walls and rocks?”

Remie stroked its chin with bent, but strong fingers and nodded. “Maybe you will be a Wizard.”

“He is not yet,” said Jonesy, "and he cannot assist you in this. I will."

Frank helped Marcus sit on the same stone as Phineas. “Catch your breath; this isn’t pleasant.” Seeing Phineas’s ashen face and shallow breathing, he added, “Jonesy, you sure these two are up for this?”

Phineas attempted to grin. “I’m tired. I’ll be fine." To Marcus, he added, “He worries like an old woman.”

Marcus nodded and stood, balancing carefully as he lifted his hand and placed it on the wall next to Remie’s, then closed his eyes.

Ruby shoved his face close to Phineas’ and sniffed. “He’s good.”

Jonesy nodded at Frank. “They gain no profit if any of us do not survive this adventure.”

Remie turned his face to look up at Marcus. “You hear. Good. Listen to all the tones and hear the song of this stone.”

Marcus furrowed his brow. After a moment, he smiled. “I hear it.” After another moment, he exclaimed, “I feel it, too!”

Frank turned as the thumping of booted feet ran toward them. Phineas growled as he rose to his feet, before Upton and at least six others carrying bright flashlights came into view.

Upton’s eyes fixed on Phineas. “Kill him! Don’t let any of them

get away!"

Frank pulled his gun and aimed, but Phineas growled louder, and Frank turned in time to see Marcus grabbing his shoulder.

"Phin!" he shouted. "Lean on me. We're getting out of here now."

Phineas didn't reply. His growl grew deeper as he sank into a crouch, glaring at Upton. Spittle dripped from his mouth.

Frank kept his gun aimed at Upton, resisting the urge to run from Phineas. He almost had a clear shot.

"Phin," Marcus said, bending close to Phineas's ear. "Eugene needs you."

He stopped growling. His shoulders relaxed; he would have fallen over had Ruby not grabbed him.

"Come!" Remie called from behind them. "We can't keep the door open long."

Frank pulled Marcus close to him, and together they tumbled forward. The wall blurred, and they disappeared through it. For less than a second, Frank saw Marcus's wide eyes and contented smile; he hadn't seen that look in a long time.

"WHERE—?"

Thick, rough fingers smelling of earth and rock clamped over Frank's mouth. Remie hissed out a warning to be quiet. The Goblin's coal-red eyes gleamed, then flashed green, blue, pink, and yellow. Following Remie's gaze to a crack in the wall they were leaning against, Frank watched neon lights flashing on and off and heard Elvis belting out his Las Vegas song again and again. A man with thin, gray hair stood in the center of a group of tourists, who stared at the flashing lights around them with their mouths hanging open and phones taking photo after photo.

"Neon Museum?" mouthed Marcus.

Remie nodded and whispered, "It's where the Vampire said to

meet. We keep this hole shielded from the Witch's magic." He pointed to the gray-haired man, who nodded to the people around him and pointed to his left. "They're moving on."

"Museum closes at ten," whispered Marcus. Frank raised an eyebrow. Marcus shrugged. "I'd hoped to see it while in town."

Frank nodded. "Now you've seen it."

They stared out at the flashing lights until a soft moan behind them interrupted Elvis's song. Phineas lay on a blanket on the ground with a pillow under his head. He rolled to his side to push himself up, but Ruby put a hand on his shoulder.

"Save your strength," it whispered.

The lights outside flashed once more before going dark.

Ruby pressed a cup to Phineas's lips. "Soon, contract ends and you'll be with your friends."

Phineas cringed, but drank it all down before pulling away.

Jonesy, looking like any other tourist, touched a patch on the wall shaped like a door. "I shall seek the Vampires."

Remie shook its head. "They know where to meet us."

Marcus sat near Phineas's head as Ruby handed him the cup, having refilled it with a dark, cool liquid. Voices from outside the room muttered, and someone flashed a light toward the cracks in the walls.

"The old pirate head still creeps me out," a woman's voice said.

"Marge always says she can hear voices inside it," said another.

"What's that?" asked the first voice. The two women were silent, and then the first one laughed. "We're way too jumpy. Let's get this done and lock up."

The second voice forced a chuckle. "Yeah."

The crunching of their feet on the hardened earth faded as they followed the path around the bend. Frank slowly let out the breath he'd been holding and shook his head.

Phineas smiled. "Not much fun being on the run."

Marcus handed the cup back to Ruby, his face suddenly relaxed, and with a faint smile on his lips. "Thanks, Ruby. Phin, do you feel

as bad as you look?"

Phineas nodded, but continued to smile in the dim light. "Been better."

Remie pointed a long finger at the crack, and his lips barely moved as he said, "Someone's coming."

Frank leaned closer, expecting to see Cesar. The figure was male, slight, and wove his way from side to side, sniffing.

Frank's mouth went dry. "Werewolf."

"Can't smell us here," Hazel said, moving to stand next to him.

With a grunt, Phineas pushed himself to his hands and knees, but Marcus held him down.

Phineas glared at Marcus, muttering through his clenched jaw, "I'm not going back there."

"Chill," whispered Marcus. "Hazel just said he can't smell us here. Besides, Cesar will be here soon."

The Werewolf stopped on the other side of the wall and sniffed. He took a step away from the wall, but his eyes remained fixed. Finally, he straightened, looked behind him, and walked away faster than he had approached as at least three pairs of shoes marched toward him.

Phineas smiled. "Cesar."

Frank pushed his face against the crack in the wall. Cesar and Ramon were almost even with them.

"About time," Remie muttered, knocking on the door-like patch on the wall and opening it. "You're late. You got my payment?"

Cesar leaned down to look Remie in the eye. "You got them both?"

"We're here," said Frank. "never more glad to see you, Cesar.

Turning, he cringed seeing the giant, skull-like head they'd been hiding inside.

Marcus stepped out leading Phineas. "And we brought a plus-one."

Jonesy followed. "I, too, have returned. Although, perhaps you did not anticipate my arrival."

Cesar nodded. “You’re included in the deal.”

Jonesy lifted his eyebrows as eyes widened, but he only bowed his head in response.

“Payment in full,” Remie demanded. Cesar opened his fist and dropped three gold buttons into Remie’s waiting hand. The grin on the Goblin’s face spread from ear to ear. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

Ruby handed a cup to Phin. “No extra charge: take another sip.”

“That’s why you’re Rub the dub: too soft,” muttered Remie. “Let’s go.”

Phineas downed the drink, but before anyone could move, a long, high-pitched howl erupted, quickly answered by others.

“They followed you,” Remie spat. "A traitor in your midst, Vampire.”

“They were waiting for us,” said Ramon. “You’ve got the snitch, Remie.”

“Ha!” Remie ran back through the door. “Not us. We’re out of here.”

Ruby and Hazel followed.

Marcus reached for the door, but it disappeared before he could touch it.

Heavy feet on gravel ran toward them, and Jonesy pushed Phineas toward Marcus. “I am best suited to deal with this.”

Frank grabbed Phineas’s other arm and helped him ease his way to the ground. “Stay with Phin, Marcus.”

He turned, pulling his gun and kneeling, ready to aim for the first figure he saw rounding the corner. He took a deep breath to calm his heartbeat, but Marcus yelled and pulled his attention.

“No!” Marcus cried. "You can’t!"

Frank turned to find Phineas trying to shove off the blanket Ruby had covered him with and Marcus holding both his shoulders.

“Get your hands off me!” shouted Phineas.

“Don’t be stupid, Phin!” shouted Frank. “You’re in no shape to fight anyone.”

He whipped back around and dropped to one knee, aiming, as figures he could feel more than see rounded the corner. Clouds of dust mixed with the shadows where the path bent right. Three figures—each on four legs—skidded to a halt. Two more figures—on two legs—ran behind them. Frank was about to shoot when a hand so cold it sent chills through him gripped his shoulder. He looked up to find Cesar next to him, staring straight ahead.

"Stay with them, Frank. I got this."

The shiver from Cesar's touch didn't go away as he leaped to the top of the neon wall. The killer inside him burst forth, glaring and grinning.

Phineas growled, "Take your hands away, Marcus. I can't change with you touching me."

Frank twisted around to grab hold of Phineas. "Stand down." He wanted to shout, but he kept his voice low, but as Phineas turned toward him, Frank recognized the fear in his eyes. "We won't let them put another collar on you."

Ramon's voice, so low and quiet Frank strained to hear him said, "Shoot for the Wolves. You can't kill them. They change and heal"

Frank looked up as, like Cesar, Ramon vanished in the shadows above them. Phineas buried his face in his hands, too exhausted to move or even argue.

"I get it," whispered Marcus. His face lit up so much, Frank could see him in the shadows. "Jonesy, I can do this."

"No!" shouted Jonesy. "You mustn't. You're not ready."

"Whatever you're going to do, Jonesy," said Frank, "you need to do it now."

More howls broke through the night. Footsteps ran toward them. Barks grew louder. Frank turned to shoot when he saw Cesar pick up two of the three Wolves he'd seen turning the corner and threw them against a wall. One of the Wolves on two legs closed in on Cesar, but the vampire moved through the shadows, grabbing the Wolf and snapped the man's back with a loud crack.

One Wolf escaped Cesar and leaped at Frank. He shot. The echo

of his shot was answered by more bullets from behind him. More Wolves and figures that moved too quickly to be human leaped off of the neon walls.

Marcus almost smiled. “Why didn’t I realize it before? I just have to remember the right sound.”

He hummed a steady, solid note in a tune Frank didn’t recognize. It shifted as the sound of growling and biting jaws grew closer. Behind the Wolves, Cesar jumped on a man running at him, lifted him, and tossed him as though he was brushing an ant off his shoulder. A bullet whistled by Frank’s ear; he turned to shoot again when someone knocked him down and held him down with a tiny hand.

“Frankie!” shouted Isabella. “Gotcha covered.”

Jonesy roared, “Marcus, no!”

“What’s he doing?” Isabella murmured.

Frank watched Jonesy stand to his full Goblin height and glow. Even his small, pointed hat, glowed blue. “Jonesy?” he opened his mouth to call, but dirt and dust filled his lungs along with the scent of wolf as he fell forward, almost on top of Phineas. As he pushed himself up, the earth fell away from under him.

He landed on his belly. His chin slammed into the solid stone floor of the Cave. Voices erupted around him along with a few screams, and two icy hands gripped his shoulders, lifting him up and to his feet.

“Frank!” Shirley’s face was only inches from his, but all he saw was stars. “Frank?”

“Shirley—?”

His gun slipped from his hand. His breath caught in his throat as he reached for it, but Shirley,grabbed it, and flipped the safety on.

“Got it,” she said.

“Doctor!” two voices behind him shouted at the same time.

Frank turned. Jonesy sat on the ground with Marcus's head in his lap. His hands were pressed against his stomach, and blood squeezed out between his fingers, turning Marcus’s shirt bright red.

Frank sank to his knees. The human doctor that had stitched up Happy skidded to a halt with his bag already open.

Jonesy looked up at Frank. “He’s alright. It is not fatal.”

“But it’s going to hurt like hell,” the doctor said without looking at either of them. “Let’s get him to a safe room.”

Through clenched teeth, Marcus mumbled, “I’m fine.”

Frank felt his heart skip three beats. His eyes clouded as Jonesy carried Marcus away. Frank couldn’t breathe. Heat poured out of his core in waves. Something cold and smooth rubbed his forehead.

“He’s fine, Frank,” came the voice, a voice he knew, but couldn’t place. He wanted Jasmine’s voice. “Breathe, Frank,” whispered the voice so calm, so soothing, so commanding. Someone lifted him off the floor and wrapped him in something soft while the voice kept whispering to him. “Marcus is well. Everything is as it should be. You’re tired; it’s time to sleep and dream.”

And that’s what Frank did.

ISABELLA

Isabella parked the van behind the farmer’s market. The stalls were all dark, except for those where people were packing up crates for the next day.

“Slowly, slowly,” she whispered.

Happy put his hand on her shoulder. “We know what to do. Be careful, little girl.”

Isabella smirked and turned to retort, but he turned away as Maura opened the back of the van. Eight men and women, already naked, changed to Wolves as they jumped out of the van skirting around the farmer’s market until they came to the stack of crates behind The Neon Museum Maura had put in place earlier in the day. Each Wolf leaped from crate to fence and into the museum without a sound. They lay on their bellies to watch and wait.

“You’re all kids,” Maura whispered as she closed the back of the van.

Isabella rolled her eyes, but followed her before jumping to the top of the museum fence to join Happy's team on their own bellies. Below them, the maze of neon signs, dark in the night, waited. She almost missed the first Wolf creeping along the gravel path below on two legs. Maura pointed to the man who was so intent on searching behind each sign he had no idea he was being watched from above.

Isabella shook her head and whispered, "I hate seeing shoddy work."

Happy looked up and nudged her hand with his snout. She followed his gaze to three Wolves—each on four legs—jumping off the top of the neon wall on the far side of the museum and disappearing into the maze.

Maura nodded. They continued to wait.

A voice so rough and rocky it had to belong to a Goblin broke the silence. "You're late."

Isabella lifted her head, but Happy grabbed her braid between his teeth and pulled while Maura's hand pushed her back down. She grimaced, but obeyed.

Low voices followed—voices Isabella knew. It was her turn to push Happy down when his ears perked up at the one voice she didn't know. She didn't hide her smile; the voice had to belong to Phineas.

Maura bounded to a crouch, ready for a fight. Happy and his friends did the same as three Wolves ran past them toward the voices. Isabella kept her eyes on Maura; she knew her stuff. She held her hand steady, watching, waiting for the sign.

A howl burst the air around them. Happy and four of his crew jumped down and ran behind the three Wolves while the other four leaped from wall to wall to the other side of the maze, where they heard other Wolves entering the museum.

Maura nodded as her mouth formed a killer's sneer that made Isabella shiver as five Wolves on two legs pulled out guns. "Mine. You get to Cesar."

Isabella ran along the wall and past the Wolves snarling and fighting each other. Two of the Wolves on two legs ran past their four-legged friends and Maura, but Isabella kept going. As she turned the corner, a shadow shifted below her. Cesar lifted a Wolf over his head and threw him against the neon wall. Glass broke as fur and skin crashed and then slid down to the ground.

Frank, Marcus, and Jonesy were huddled around a naked man. The four Wolves she'd driven there leaped off the wall landing on top of six Wolves heading straight for the group.

"Stand down," Frank shouted mustering all the authority he could muster.

"Stupid Wolf," muttered Isabella, but then she saw Upton and Upwood running toward them with a dozen men, not Wolves. "Odd."

She jumped down as the men pulled out guns and started shooting, not caring if they hit Wolves or people. Isabella rushed behind Frank, knocking him over as bullets buzzed past his head.

"Frankie! Gotch'a covered."

As Frank got up, Jonesy's voice rose over the gunfire. "Marcus, no!"

Isabella smelled blood and turned to see Marcus bleeding from his side and standing over Phineas. Jonesy stood at his full height waving his arms.

"What's he doing?"

Jonesy stood alone, glowing like a giant, blue, neon sign. His hands pushed the neon blue light away from him. It landed on top of Upton—or maybe it was Upwood—and six figures heading toward her. They all fell, writhing and screaming in pain.

"Awesome," Isabella muttered, but then had to duck as bullets whipped past her.

"Issy!" Jonesy called, motioning her to him.

As soon as she was close enough for him to reach, he put his arm around her. Bullets ricocheted around them.

"Where's Marcus and the others?"

A grumble rumbled through Jonesy's chest. "Safe, I hope."

"Smart kid," Isabella said, ducking as a Wolf leaped up and over Jonesy's head to tackle two attempting to sneak up behind them.

Jonesy looked all around them and shouted, "They're running away!"

Isabella looked behind Jonesy. Cesar held either Upton or Upwood over his head and broke him in half. "Oh, the boss does nothing in halves."

The rest of the Werewolves and the men scattered. Happy's crew ran after the injured, catching them in their claws and holding on until they cried out and rolled onto their backs.

"Issy!" Cesar walked toward her, dusting off his black jeans. "Van."

Isabella skipped over the museum wall, ran to the van, and started the engine. Within two minutes, the back was full of Wolves —wounded and healthy—Cesar, Ramon, and Jonesy. As soon as the door closed, she sped to the interstate and away from town.

"Here," Happy said, pointing to an exit before falling to his side as Isabella sped the van through rush hour traffic, jumped the curb and exited the highway. A quick glance in the rearview mirror made Isabella smile; a black Chevelle sped up to stay close to the van.

"Chevelle coming in hot. Haven't seen one like that in years. Gorgeous. Driver's pissed."

"Take the first left," Happy shouted, buttoning his shirt. "Cesar killed his twin, so yeah, he's pissed."

Isabella swerved into the lane with oncoming traffic, then jerked back to the far right lane. "Driving and revenge do not go together. Rule number one: always concentrate on the road. Is that Upton or Upwood?"

Jonesy, shrugged his shoulders. "Too ugly to care which is which." He twisted around to see into the back of the van even as he unbuckled his seat belt. "Mrs. Smith will send that spell to kill you, Cesar."

The light on the next block turned red; Cesar opened the back door. “Go.”

Ramon, three of Happy’s friends, and Maura jumped out the back as Isabella almost stopped before driving the van onto the sidewalk.

“Where—?” Isabella started to ask when she glanced in the rearview mirror..

“Back here, Issy,” Cesar said without opening his eyes.

“Tail’s too close,” she said.

“Now!”

Isabella slammed her foot on the brake pedal, squealing the brakes to bring the van to a complete stop. Happy lumbered into the driver’s seat as two of his Wolves, now in human form but only partially dressed, threw a lead blanket over her and Cesar as soon as she was next to him.

“I thought—”

Cesar whispered in her ear, “It’s coming.”

Jonesy grumbled, “She’s cast a stronger spell, Cesar. I will do what I can.”

At that moment, fire shot across Isabella’s back through the blanket. She wanted to scream, but clenched her jaw and eyelids as tight as she could.

Then it was gone. Cesar pushed the blanket off them.

“Done,” he said as the van skidded to a halt.

“Ow,” muttered Isabella as the Wolf next to her stood to pull his pants on and fell on top of her. “Not now, sweetie. Call me later.”

Happy rolled down his window. “Hey, Martin!”

Isabella craned her neck to see past the others, but Cesar put his hand on her shoulder, and gently pushed her down.

“Call in the black Chevelle,” continued Happy. “I’ll be damned if the driver’s not wanted. Been hauling it to get to you before he does.”

“You got it, Captain,” the officer replied.

Before Happy closed the window and drove off, he added, “I’m

heading to the station. Call me and let me know what you find out."

"Jeez," said Isabella, moving to prop her head up next to Happy in the driver's seat. She kissed his cheek. "Never thought I'd be saved by a copper." Turning back, she realized she and Cesar had been lying on top of three unconscious Wolves. "What are we doing with these guys?"

"Marcus explained how he removed Happy's collar," said Jonesy. "I believe I can replicate the process."

"Hope so," said Happy. "We've got hold of a few others. We need to get their collars off."

The van's blinker clicked as it slowed, then turned into the entrance of a police garage.

"Too weird for me: working with coppers. Before you know it, I'll have a buzzer and a badge." Isabella turned and winked at Cesar. "Imagine me, a copper? That'll be the day."

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS LATER, Wolves were still wandering in. Aside from the three unconscious ones they brought with them in the van, Maura showed up with five more also unconscious and collared before the sun had even set. After midnight, Ramon showed up with two more, plus an expectant wife who refused to leave her husband's side. Jonesy removed the collars from all of them, but it took him a lot longer than it did Marcus. And, just like it did Marcus, the process exhausted him.

Isabella watched the newly freed Wolves dress and hug and eat the candy bars and prepackaged meals she'd found. Cesar and Happy looked remarkably satisfied even as they questioned each Wolf about the High Meadow Casino and Mrs. Smith.

Ramon refused to venture more than a few feet from Cesar, always watching and running his hand through the short stubble on his head as though missing his long, platinum hair. He still hadn't told her why he cut his hair. Meanwhile, Maura wandered the halls,

watching everyone and everything. Happy assured them no one paid attention to the old city bunker except during emergency disaster drills, but Isabella didn't trust that the mayor or someone on the city council wouldn't call for one. She made the rounds checking locks on all exits.

The hall leading away from the circular meeting room echoed with sterility; each door was closed, locked, and clearly labeled for each city department. The Wolves that had already been grilled stretched out on blankets on the floor. All were exhausted and hungry. Ramon had brought in buckets of fried chicken, but they were already gone, bones and all. Isabella shook her head as she passed an older man with thin, gray hair.

"Too thin," she sighed, even as she cringed at the smell of the chicken and unwashed bodies.

A grumble filtered through the one open door at the end of the hall. Isabella tiptoed to it, knowing the sound had to come from Jonesy. She opened the door of the janitor's closet, and there he sat on the floor; his scales pale in the dim light. Isabella had suggested this closet for him to get some sleep away from Wolves with their questions and pleas to free relatives and friends. In one hand, he held a green, leather-bound book. In his enormous hand, it looked too small to be real.

Jonesy turned his head as she entered and smiled. "Am I needed?" he asked in that deep rumbling voice of his as a blue haze bubbled away from his skin, returning him to human form.

"Even if they did need you," she began sitting next to him, "I'd tell them you were too tired to be much good to anybody. Get some sleep while you can. Nobody's told me anything about heading to —" She poked her head out the door and gazed at the sleeping faces near them. "You-know-where."

Jonesy laughed that full laughter he had, even if he kept it soft to wake no one. "I believe Cesar will stay until he feels the Wolves can leave undetected and are well enough to defend themselves."

"Sure," Isabella said with a nod. "In the meantime, we're sitting

ducks. But, um, well… Cesar tells me Marcus, Frank, and Phin all got to you-know-where safely. I don't doubt him, but how are they? I mean, I smelled Marcus's blood. Cesar says Frank is fine, too, but what happened to him? Nobody tells me anything."

Jonesy put his free hand on Isabella's knee. "They are well. I was with Cesar when he communicated with Shirley. Marcus frightened them all when he used magic to pop into you-know-where. Considering it was the second time he had done so, I should think they would be accustomed to it. He was bleeding, which frightened many, but it was only from a minor injury."

Isabella almost jumped to her feet. "But Frank? Oh, and Phineas? He looked like what the cat drags in!"

Jonesy wrapped an arm around her shoulders, giving her a gentle squeeze. "Phineas is exhausted and starving, as are these poor souls."

Isabella squeezed Jonesy's hand. "Frankie?" Her voice cracked, but she didn't care if Jones heard her fear.

"I promise you. The Goblins carried him into the casino on Mother's Song with all diligence, but it is difficult for humans," he said. "And then seeing blood on his nephew…he was ill from both the journey and the shock."

Isabella smiled, let go of Jonesy's hand, and pointed at the book in his hand. "Good. So, what's that?"

Jonesy hummed. "I have suspicions, but if I am correct, the implications are severe."

"So, it's not just a book," said Isabella. "I get that."

Jonesy ran a thick, blue finger along the book's spine. "There are books that give us much pleasure and laughter, that make us weep and remember those we once loved, that provide us with great knowledge. This is not a book to be read—or even to be carried—with those ideals in mind."

Isabella stared at the book, licking her lips. Her fingers twitched, almost reaching for it, but before her hand reached the book, she clasped both hands to her chest. "Ugh, magic!"

“I believe it is.” Jonesy held the book in both hands. A great grumble rumbled through his chest. “Please step outside, Issy. Just in case.”

Isabella jumped and twisted, standing in the doorframe and biting her bottom lip. Hearing the softest of footsteps, she glanced down the hall. Maura tiptoed between the sleepers. Isabella held up her hand to stop her. When she looked back down to Jonesy, he opened the book. A cloud of green light drifted off the page, turning Jonesy’s face from blue to gray.

“Ah.” His eyes widened as silver sparkles filled the green haze.

“Cesar!” Isabella shouted as the beautiful silver sparkles and green clouds whirled like a tornado and shifted green to gray, to black, which grew larger and larger filling the room with shadow. “Close it, Jonesy!”

Around her, the sleepers woke up leaping to their feet. A few screamed or called out, but others morphed to Wolf barking warnings.

“I can’t! Run!” Jonesy’s voice roared but from far away.

Maura wrapped her arm around her waist, holding tight. Cesar stood in the doorframe, shouting at Jonesy. Ramon stood behind him, pushing against Cesar’s back as the air pushed against them both.

Isabella wrapped her arm around Maura’s shoulders. Together, they stepped forward, but the wind was too great. Then, hands pushed against their backs. The Wolves, still human, stood behind them, pushing them forward. As a single mass, they made it to Ramon, and leaned into Cesar’s back. As Isabella touched Cesar’s shoulder, she felt a tension like steel when he moved his arm in front of his face, mumbling words she couldn’t hear.

“Run,” whispered a voice like rolling boulders.

And then, just beneath the roar of the tornado, Cesar, almost laughing, whispered, “I can do this.”

The wind dwindled to a soft breeze. Only the combined strength of Isabella, Maura, and Ramon prevented everyone from falling. She

lifted her head and peaked around Cesar's shoulder. The black shadows still swirled, but now they spun in the opposite direction into the book, sprawled open in front of a prostrate Jonesy.

He lifted himself to all fours. Bits of blue, green, and silver light as well as shadows flew out of the fur on his head. His pointed hat lay next to him. He put it on and reached for the book. His massive shoulders shook as he bit his lip and lifted the book with his huge hands, his arms flexing and rolling their great muscles.

"Something to tie it closed!" he yelled.

Ramon leaped forward, pulling his belt off. Jonesy grabbed it before muttering words Isabella couldn't understand as he wrapped it around the book. The shadows faded as the belt tightened and glowed with golden light that twinkled and flashed until it faded to bright green vines.

Finally, he buckled it.

Cesar dropped to a squat. Isabella and Ramon each grabbed one of his arms to help him stand, and he smiled.

"I'm alright. Time to get moving."

Maura moved to Jonesy's side, the muscles in his massive arms quivering. "You alright, big guy?"

Jonesy's face broke into a huge smile as he looked around him. "We did very well, Cesar. We are both tired, but we have put fear into one I did not suspect." He waved to the Wolves. "With this now known, I can free all the Wolves, but you are correct. We must flee this place. Enemies know we are here."

What Isabella admired most about Werewolves was their ability to adapt as a single unit. They moved with an unbelievable stealth and as single unit. They filled police vans driven by Maura and Happy and made no sound. Isabella drove the almost silent Cadillac to the entrance, where Ramon guided Jonesy and Cesar into the car. Both were too exhausted to care which direction they were walking. She cleared the police garage and sped away with all the speed and tricks she'd learned from driving for bank robbers, kidnappers, and assassins.

“Hang on, boys!”

She grinned, glancing in the rearview mirror. A group of Wolves ran on two legs into the parking lot as another van screeched to a halt in front of city hall. Isabella laughed as she hadn’t in days.

ISABELLA WALKED UP TO SHIRLEY, leaning against the entrance to the tunnel watching Phineas.

"Keeps running back and forth.”

“Staying fit and healthy,” said Isabella.

She was not watching Phineas run the length of the tunnel and back on four legs, as he did every day. Her eyes fixed on Frank as he walked into Cesar’s office. He walked slower than he should, but he was steady on his feet.

“Oh,” said Shirley, “he’s healthy.”

Isabella turned as Phineas returned and transformed to stand on two legs. The thin track lights caught his tan, sculpted backside as he rolled his head and let his long, dark hair dance along his broad shoulders. As he bent forward, his buttocks gleamed, and the muscles of his legs rippled when he stood and stretched as he pulled a shirt off a peg on the wall.

“Very healthy,” Isabella said, forgetting for a moment her worry for Frank. “You and him?”

Shirley laughed. “A lady never tells.” Shirley shook her head. “But right now, he’s only got eyes for getting out of here and ripping that Witch apart. Still, a little diversion is good for all bodies. It relieves tensions.”

Isabella puckered her lips, throwing Phineas a kiss as he stood turning to face them as he tucked in his tee shirtT-shirt and buttoned his jeans. He caught the kiss in his hand and winked at them both.

“Ow!,” moaned Shirley. “I gotta check upstairs before the meeting. See’ya Issy.”

Frank coughed, and Isabella turned away from Phineas to head to the office.

“Got you covered, Frankie.”

Frank

Frank shifted his bulk and decided the chair in front of Cesar’s desk was too soft, but there was no place to sit where Isabella’s eyes wouldn't stare at him. Wherever he went, they followed. He sighed and turned to look out the door into the Cave, but still no Cesar. Since returning to the Cave, whenever Frank found Cesar, he was busy giving orders, listening to reports, tapping texts, walking without looking up from his tablet, and even spending time upstairs in the Speakeasy talking to people Frank didn’t recognize.

Even Shirley spent little time talking to Frank, but when she did, she gushed about organizing the parties booking the Speakeasy and her low employee turnover rate. As soon as the doctor allowed Frank out of bed, he’d gone upstairs for a meal and conversation. Shirley sat next to him as he nursed a cup of coffee and listened to a jazz band charm a full house.

“Talked to Happy last night,” Shirley said, leaning back in the chair next to him. “Says things are going well. More and more Wolves are coming to town and agreeing to secure their collard family members until Jonesy can get to them. He asked about you: Told him you were good.”

“Where is Jonesy?” Frank asked, but Shirley was already standing.

“Sleeping, or he was last I saw of him,” she said. “Poor guy’s been run ragged, but he won’t let Marcus help.”

“Good,” Frank muttered, but Shirley was already gone.

Now he sat in Cesar’s office waiting, frustrated. He’d get answers today, or…he sighed.

“What’s the matter?” Isabella asked, suddenly sitting next to him. “You okay?”

Frank stroked his beard, flinching as his fingers touched the bruise running along his jawline. At least his beard covered most of it.

Isabella stared at his face, running her own hand along her jawline as if she could feel his discomfort.

“Stop that,” Frank muttered. “It doesn’t look that bad, does it?”

Isabella’s mouth opened, but Phineas walked in before she could respond and said, “You look like shit.”

“Thanks,” Frank grumbled.

Isabella smiled at him. “I’ve seen you looking better.”

Frank folded his arms across his chest. “You’ve got to stop following me around like I’m about to break.” He leaned forward as her lovely wide eyes dropped to her lap and put his hand on her shoulder. “I’m okay. The doctor and Jonesy both said my body just couldn’t handle all that traveling the song or whatever. Made my system shut down—for just a sec. Appreciate your concern.”

Frank scowled at Phineas as he sat down, hiding a smile with a bottle of water.

The corners of Isabella’s mouth lifted. “Shirley said she’d never seen someone alive but so white. Your heart even missed some beats. You almost died, Frankie.”

“But I didn’t.” Frank leaned back, turning away from her sweet face. “Best cure for me now is to be busy. They kept me in bed for three days, and now nobody's talking. I need to know what’s going on.”

“As do I,” Jonesy said as he joined them, his grin so wide his long, white teeth peeked out between his blue lips. He stretched his back and poured himself a mug of coffee so large, he should have drunk from the pot. “I had the best of sleeps, and I feel recovered enough to continue my efforts to free the Werewolves, but Ramon tells me that I am not to leave. Do either of you know what has happened?”

Isabella stood and pulled her hair back; her thin fingers wove through it until it was arranged in a long braid hanging down her

back. “That’s why we’re here, too. Cesar’s pulling everyone in. Something’s up.” She moved to the door and hugged Marcus when he arrived. “Hey, kid. Looking good.”

Marcus hugged Isabella before sitting next to Frank; his smile faded. “You okay?”

Frank pointed to the bruise. “You know this is your fault, don't you? You get to explain it to your aunt.”

“Sorry?” Marcus cringed and turned to Jonesy. “I hear you figured out how to free all the Wolves at once.”

“You showed me the basics,” said Jonesy. “And then I discovered new information, but we will discuss that once the others are here.”

“What others?” asked Marcus.

“Happy?” Frank asked.

“Where is Happy?” asked Phineas.

“Sorry, Phin.” Cesar walked in with Ramon following close. “Too risky to bring in any Wolves right now. Shirley’s coming down.” Settling behind his desk, he brought up the camera feed at the High Meadow Casino. Shirley arrived and closed the door behind her. “Now we’re organized and have all the facts. Let’s get a plan to stop Mrs. Smith.”

“Whatever you have planned, Cesar,” said Jonesy, “we have five days to accomplish it.”

Frank cleared his throat. “What the hell happened after Marcus got us out of The Neon Museum? No one’s telling me anything.”

Cesar opened his mouth, closed it, and looked away from Frank.

“Damn it, Cesar,” Frank huffed and pounded the arm of his chair with his fist. “I’m not broken. Will everyone stop treating me like I am?” He sat up and waved at Isabella. "Your folks might take your orders without question, but I don’t, and neither does Marcus. Talk."

Isabella put her hand on Frank’s arm. “It’s just that—”

“I’m sorry, Frank. You’re right. I should have included you sooner, but…” Cesar glanced at Jonesy. “This is his story.”

Jonesy pulled a green, leather book wrapped with either a belt or a vine; Frank couldn't tell which.

"This," Jonesy held the book up for all to see, "answered a question both Teaser and myself have been asking since we realized what Mrs. Smith was doing. It is not a journal for writing one's thoughts, but a communication tool. I believe Queen Diviva, who rules in the Wildes and is Mrs. Smith's younger sister, has one like it. Cesar and the others were with me when I opened it in the emergency shelter below your house of government."

Phineas leaned forward, sniffing, and reached for the book, but quickly dropped his arm and sat up straight. "It's wrong…stinks of death."

"Witches and Goblins both know magic for communicating over long distances, even as far as distant worlds." He stopped and shook his head as Phineas's face lit up. "My deepest regrets, but I cannot communicate with anyone in the Wildes until the worlds realign."

Frank turned away as the hope of getting in touch with his sister faded from Phineas's face and asked, "But Mrs. Smith could?"

Jonesy grinned, but also squinted. "If she had this, she could, but I removed it from her desk before I left the casino. I am no talented thief, and the ramifications of the ease in which I removed this without permission still confounds me."

"You get used to it," Isabella said.

"I presumed it was how Mrs. Smith and her sister communicated without myself knowing, but when I opened it, I discovered a third player in this scheme, one who is driving the actions of two foolish, power-hungry witches." He paused. "A Fae."

"Like Tinkebell?" Isabella asked.

Frank wanted to laugh, but as the faces of both Jonesy and Cesar turned so severe, his laugh faded before leaving his throat.

"No, Isabella," Jonesy said, shaking his head. "Fae are evil creatures who take no joy unless they are destroying."

From the bar behind Frank, Shirley asked, "What's this Fae planning with the Witches?"

Jonesy's face broke into a wide grin, almost as if he wanted to laugh. "Nothing now. Without this, he has no way to communicate with Mrs. Smith. I held this open long enough to perceive that the Fae are not in this world or in the Wildes."

"You're sure?" asked Cesar. "And there's no other way for them to communicate?"

Jonesy leaned back with a deep sigh. "The Fae have their own form of magic, but even they cannot reconnect with one from which they have been disconnected."

"But when you opened the book," Ramon said, "there was magic. We all saw it. You needed Cesar's help to control it."

"They use Shadow magic," answered Cesar. "We bend shadows."

"Exactly!" shouted Jonesy, this time letting loose his deep, rolling laugh. "An unexpected complication that, by now, the Fae are most likely aware of."

"By now?" asked Cesar. "I thought they attacked us."

"A defensive spell only placed inside this book to ensure those such as myself do not read it," answered Jonesy. "To communicate in real time, all parties must have the book open and quills in hand. However, others using this journal will know it was opened and sealed by someone who could fold its shadow spell away."

"Vampire magic," said Marcus. "Makes sense: they need a defense against magic."

"Forget what I said about wanting to twist shadows, Cesar," Isabella said, crossing her arms over her chest and rubbing her arms as if she were cold. "I don't like magic anymore."

"Learn or die," muttered Ramon.

Frank watched as Ramon's eyes stared at something far away: a memory, or maybe a nightmare. He shuddered not wanting to know about anything that scared Ramon.

Cesar cleared his throat. "We'll talk about that later. I assume that whatever Mrs. Smith's part of the plan was is now tainted." Cesar turned to the screen behind him and pointed at the live feed from the front of the casino. "Look. It's the middle of the afternoon,

and not a Werewolf in sight."

Phineas moved to stand in front of the screen. "You haven't been able to free that many, have you, Jonesy?"

Cesar answered, "Happy's secured enough Wolves to threaten her plans. Pulling her forces in is the logical thing to do."

"You mean locking them in the dungeon?" asked Marcus.

Frank shivered thinking of the cell they'd found Phineas in.

"Unlikely," said Cesar, "but they might be back in the tunnels. With Happy away from his job, the police have stopped searching them."

"Then that's where I'll go," said Phineas. "Jonesy should come too, and…"

He trailed off as Jonesy didn't move.

In a voice so soft, Cesar said, "Sorry, Phineas."

Phineas stared at Cesar, his lips pursed so tightly his lips turned white. His eyes narrowed, but Cesar didn't look away.

"Happy agrees," he added. "He's gathering everyone outside of town. That's what's going to get us into the casino." His head tilted. "You see it, Phin. The plan will work. Nobody wants the Wolves trapped in the tunnels."

Jonesy's deep, rolling voice broke the tension. "I am, even as we speak, preparing the spell to free all Wolves at once. I can do this, Phineas."

Phineas's shoulders slumped as he ran his hands through his hair. "I can't keep sitting around here doing nothing, Cesar. I'm going nuts."

"Then work with me at the end of the tunnel," said Jonesy. "This spell must be executed exactly, or I could cause more harm. You no longer have a collar, but you may feel the spell."

Phineas stood and leaned against the bar without looking at anyone, but nodded his agreement as Shirley handed him a bottle of water.

"Jonesy," said Cesar, "we don't have much time. We have to be at the Heart as soon as the alignment begins. We don't have time to

fight enslaved Wolves to get to it. Isabella, Ramon, you'll master twisting shadows by then."

"Hang on!" shouted Isabella."You said it took you—"

"You don't have years," he said, cutting off Isabella. "Frank, you and Marcus need to be there, too."

Frank sat up, gripping the arms of his chair. "Marcus isn't going in there. You've seen what magic does to him."

"I've got this, Frank. It's okay," said Marcus.

Frank stared at him. "You're not dying just to prove you're some sort of Wizard."

"I'm not going to die!" Marcus argued. "You're the one whose heart stopped."

A chill wrapped around Frank, making it hard to breathe.

"We all have to be there, Frank," said Cesar, "or we all die."

Isabella slipped behind Frank and stroked his back. "Maybe Frank's right." Her soothing motions slowed as she asked, "Hey, she's in town, isn't she?"

Frank looked up and realized the room was too quiet. Everyone was staring at Cesar.

"You talking about Mary Midnight, the Vampire you said to avoid?" asked Marcus. "I thought she couldn't come to Vegas."

Cesar nodded. "She's not in town, but Mary Midnight is close. Mrs. Smith broke the contract when she attacked me in her casino. Mary is keeping up her end of the contract and preventing any other Eldests from entering Vegas while Mrs. Smith controls it, and Mrs. Smith is still technically in control."

Jonesy stood and walked to the door. "That explains how you twisted the shadows to defeat the protection spell of the book. You continue to learn. Good. Now, my part of the plan depends on my creation of a spell. This requires great subtleties in Mother's Song. I need your aid Phineas. We have five days. I suggest we begin. Marcus, you may learn, but you have not the skills to contribute to this endeavor. I suggest we begin now." He stopped and bowed his head to Cesar. "That is, if our meeting is adjourned."

“For now,” said Cesar. “Frank, I promise to make no plans without including you.”

Frank got up from the chair. His legs shook, but he held them still. “Later,” he muttered before leaving the room. By the time he reached the elevator, Isabella was at his side. Without looking at her, he grumbled, “Don’t you have magic to learn?”

“I’ve got an old man I’m worried about. Gotta make sure he’s okay before I do that,” Isabella replied, tucking her arm around his.

As the elevator moved up, Frank leaned into her, glad for her strength.

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CHAPTER 9
ESCAPES AND NEAR MISSES: THE WILDES

EUGENE

Eugene's leg bounced up and down as she sat next to Ebon driving the old wagon. After another day spent sneaking along mostly empty forest paths, they'd found the main road early that morning and joined a steady stream of people and carts. She kept the hood of her cloak over her face and tugged at the oversize gloves and long-sleeved tunic to make sure her tattoos remained hidden. Since CC and the Werewolves left, she'd felt exposed.

Ebon shook his head. “Stop worrying. It’s a good plan.”

Ari stuck his head between them from the back of the wagon. “You really think so?”

Ebon nodded. “Yes. The simplest plans are generally the most effective.”

“Easy for you to say,” muttered Eugene. “You’re walking in on two legs.”

“But being a dog—” Ari raised his hands in surrender before Eugene could interrupt him. “Sorry—being an ordinary mutt has allowed you to get this far without a hitch. It’s only natural you keep it up to get inside the High Meadow Casino to rescue Arika, and everyone knows I’ve taken on a dog. It’ll look odd if I’m seen entering the city without you. What could go wrong?”

“What could go wrong? First, the Witches probably already

know the Painted Wolf's masquerading as a mutt. Even if they don't, they'll realize this mutt has some sort of spell on her," argued Eugene. "And how do we know Arika needs rescuing?"

Ari scratched his chin and stared ahead at nothing. "Even Mandrake says Teaser's good at spells that change your shape. And, you have a twin; don't you know more about him than you know about yourself? Arika may not be in trouble, but she gets really trusting when adults tell her how clever she is. I don't see our aunt being anything but super smart enough to give her all sorts of compliments to make her do what she wants her to do. Actually, Arika will want to trust our aunt even if she doesn't shower her with praise. I just hope she hasn't turned Arika against us."

Eugene's leg stopped bouncing as she twisted around and put her hand on Ari's shoulder. "She's your sister. She'll trust you. The problem will be getting her to trust me."

"She thinks you're weird," Ari admitted with a smile, "but cool."

Eugene tugged at the hood of her cloak and slumped forward as four soldiers on horseback sped past them. "Let's hope she thinks I'm cool enough to follow. All this magic is freaking me out. And, that's the second set of soldiers I've seen in the last hour."

"Regular patrols," Lurid said, riding up to them with his guitar strapped to his front. "Time we played our parts properly. Ebon, you know what to do."

He nudged his horse ahead of their cart and strummed the guitar. Soon, he was singing off-key and very loudly.

Cannon rode up beside the wagon. "No shenanigans, boy."

"Yes, uncle," Ebon said without changing his expression.

Ari put his arm around Eugene's shoulder. "I'm sorry it bothers you so much to be spelled, but you know, I've been spelled my whole life to look human and I didn't even know it. Oh," his eyes widened and he smiled, "that explains why I'm so much taller than my friends, doesn't it? Can't quite get rid of all of my mass." Shrugging his shoulders, he continued, "I want to go back to school, but I'm getting used to being blue and making myself big and small.

It's fun. And, I want to know what it means to be a Goblin. But, Scott and I have a wicked science project planned for next year." He laughed. "When we get back, you'll be taller than me again."

Eugene laughed with him. "Hadn't thought of that. I think I'm always going to think of you as the big blue guy now, though."

"Softly," Lucrid said, letting his horse return to their side. "Lots of ears are listening now. They can hear you talking."

Ari's shoulders slumped. "Sorry. You've been away from home for a long time. Do you miss it?"

"Too long," Lucrid said as he strummed his guitar. "When you and your were sister were born and your parents disappeared, the Council knew something was wrong, so they sent me here."

Eugene sat up, keeping her hood low, but leaning toward Lucrid. "Why?"

"To observe and report," Lucrid answered.

"Report what?"

"What's been happening," Lucrid said, lifting in his stirrups a bit to look ahead.

"You knew something was happening and did nothing?" Eugene asked, her voice raising an octave.

Lurid let out a long sigh. "You're forgetting the Witches' mandate: the only good redhead is a dead redhead. Witches and Goblins uniting would bring about peace or the end of everything. We've been on the wrong side of them before, and it didn't end well for us. Let's just say we're overly cautious."

Ari propped his chin on the back of the wagon seat. "There are even a lot of Goblins who aren't happy being friendly with the Witches."

"I'm glad you're here," Eugene said, placing her hand on Ari's head and rubbing the fur around his ears.

Ari let out a long sigh. "But what if the problems with the magic are our fault? We'd have to leave and never come back,"

"Don't forget you're half witch."

"Oh, yeah," Ari said with a nod. "Teaser's been so concerned

about my Goblin side I forget that."

"Looking at you," said Lucrid, "it's clear you're not all Goblin."

Eugene nodded, and Ebon added, "First time I saw you, I thought there must be some human in you."

Ari said, "Mandrake's half witch, too, but he won't say anything about his mother. His dad's dead."

"Things will be good again," said Ebon. "I feel it in my bones."

"Keep that feeling, Ebon. More patrols heading this way," said Lucrid, who once again lifted his voice to sing off-key and rode ahead of them.

Four more soldiers on horseback rode past them and against the flow of traffic.

They rode in silence until Teaser rode by to join Lucrid, and Carnelian jogged up to them with Ari's horse.

"Mandrake says it's time you joined them. Teaser says something about a show."

Ari jumped over the edge of the cart and mounted the horse, but before he left, he told Eugene, "Arika's right; you're cool. And I can't worry right now about what might be. I have to get to Arika so we can fix what we broke."

"None of this is your fault," said Eugene. "Mrs. Smith and her sister are trying to manipulate magic for their own gain, but the magic is fighting back. We're going to help Mother and save everyone from themselves, even if they end up killing each other afterward."

Carolinian shook his head, mumbling, "Assuming we don't all kill each other first."

Eugene jumped off the wagon shaking her head to Carolinian. "At least you don't have to enter the city as a mutt."

TEASER'S SPELL WORKED. When they entered the city, no one challenged her. Now, she ran down a side street, weaving around

barrels stacked next to the side doors of warehouses. If anyone noticed her, it was only to shout for her to get out of the way; no one stopped her.

At the end of the street, she looked around the corner. Men and women stepped out of the warehouses with lanterns. The sun was just setting, and Eugene could see people stacking crates, locking doors, and grabbing the occasional cuddle in the long shadows growing from the buildings.

The wind blew from the north and carried smoke and blood from the Dragon House. Also on the wind was the occasional crack of a whip, a whimper, or even a muffled roar.

Eugene shook her head and proceeded slower than before, keeping close to the sides of buildings. Dogs in the warehouses barked at her through locked doors.

A woman in the process of locking up pushed a door open, shouting, “Shut it, you stupid dog!”

Eugene resisted the urge to bark at her, but after yet another dog challenged her presence, she lifted her head and let out one loud, authoritative bark. All the warehouse dogs quieted, but soon, as she’d expected, a large, gray dog rounded a corner, sniffed the air, and headed toward her. Eugene sat and looked at the dog, its fur shaggy and unkept. There was no collar around its neck, so she walked up to it. To her surprise, it backed away, looked back, and then issued a quick, quiet bark before nudging her toward a stack of crates with just enough room for them to hide behind. The gray dog stared down the street, where a group of soldiers—some human and some Wolf—headed their way.

“Patrol?” asked Eugene.

The gray dog pushed her further into the shadows as a Wolf Soldier broke away from the group and shook the lock on the door of the warehouse next to them.

“Locked,” she called back to her captain before returning to her place in formation.

The captain grunted and motioned another soldier to try another

door. Eugene slowed her heartbeat as the patrol moved on, the leader occasionally telling someone to lock up and get home before curfew.

They were almost a block away when the woman who'd checked the door closest to Eugene spun around, sniffing the air. Eugene's hackles rose, but the gray dog rushed toward the soldier, barking so loud all the warehouse dogs began to answer at once. The gray dog brought its paws up to the soldier's shoulders and licked the woman's face.

"Fancy!" the soldier exclaimed, rubbing her hands along both sides of Fancy's face. "Up to your old tricks, I see."

The captain of the group looked back and grumbled. "So it was you getting all these dogs worked up. Figures. Cadence, keep him close. Fancy can walk with us, but only until we're done with this round."

Cadence, still petting Fancy, whispered, "I've got some dinner for you."

Cadence looked back once. Eugene pushed herself back even further as the light of a lantern glinted on the black stone attached to the woman's collar. Fancy pushed his muzzle into a pouch dangling from her belt.

"Okay, okay," Cadence said. "You're hungry; I get it. Let's go."

Eugene watched the soldiers and Fancy walk down the street, checking the occasional door, until they disappeared around a corner. Only then did she leave her hiding place. As she did, her stomach rumbled. Before she could think about where to find food, she felt another rumble from deep in the earth, through her paws, and along her spine. She stood as still as she could, her ears twisting, listening, as the rumble she felt was answered by a rumbling from the trees in the wind. As one, all the birds in the city leapt into the air calling out the alarm. With her next breath, the earth shook. Instinct streaked through her as screams and shouts erupted from the next street over. Barks from the dogs trapped in their warehouse around her called out their warning, and Eugene

dashed into the doorway closest to her.

The earth stopped shaking. Dust clouded Eugene's sight and smell; she sneezed and shook her head. The earthquake faded to tremors as the damage and confusion spread. Children cried. A woman near her screamed over a mound that might have once been a man. Shouts came from behind her. The doorway she'd run to for cover no longer held a door; it had fallen inside the building. Someone inside the building groaned.

Eugene jumped up onto the long, stone beam that once held up the ceiling to climb over the rubble. It only took one sniff for her to find blood and flesh beneath the stones. There were no sounds of breathing or beating hearts, but once again, she heard a moan. She hopped from stone to stone until the moan and then a whimper crept out from a hole about the size of her muzzle to her right. She barked and sniffed the hole, blinking away dust. The light of a glowing stone filtered through cracks in the rubble, revealing a cavern made by great stone beams broken and leaning against each other, forming a triangular space where a man lay curled into a ball.

She called out in a bark. The man rolled to his side, revealing a bloodied face and two small children cradled against his chest. The youngest child, a toddler, pointed to Eugene. "Puppy," she said before sniffing away fear.

The man wiped dirt and blood away from his eyes. The effort caused him another groan. He opened his mouth to speak, but even Eugene's sharp ears could only make out a coarse grumble.

An older child—but still terribly young—pushed against the man's chest to raise onto its knees. "Pops. Pops. Pops?"

The man shifted again, revealing an infant lying between the two small children stirring and opening its eyes with a coo. Eugene barked again; six pairs of tiny eyes looked up at her smiling. The man groaned again.

Rubble fell behind her, causing Eugene to jump and turn around. Cadence, the soldier Eugene had seen earlier and Fancy

moved toward her.

"Fancy!" Eugene barked. "Get help! Hurry! There's a family stuck down here."

Fancy jumped in front of Cadence, barking frantically until she stopped. Then Fancy leaned forward, grabbed the hem of the woman's tunic with his teeth, and tugged. Eugene barked at them to hurry and moved out of the way when the woman reached her.

"Ed? Ed!" Cadence called. Her face grew pale as she coughed dust out of her lungs, then shouted to the soldiers behind her. "Here! Ed and the kids are alive, but they're trapped."

Three more soldiers raced toward the rubble. Eugene ran to the base and barked at them until they reached the people in the hole. Fancy followed her lead.

She sat when she heard a tiny voice call out, "Puppy?"

EUGENE FOLLOWED Fancy down an alley with no people, stepping over broken shutters, fallen doors, and spilled baskets of grain and fruits, but the homes still stood. Fancy led her inside a house with a table holding bowls of food.

Eugene looked back out the door, rotating her ears around until she realized they were on a street opposite from where she found the man and his children. Eugene looked from Fancy to the table. Her stomach grumbled.

"Doesn't seem right. I mean, people are hurt and need help."

Her stomach growled again, and she wrapped her fingers around a bowl.

"Teaser," she muttered, looking down at her tattoos. "Now what am I going to do?"

Fancy barked once and jumped away from her.

"Really?" she asked, looking down at him. "Like you don't know it's still me. You saw it happen."

Fancy leaned forward, his nose twitching as he sniffed. Eugene

held out her hand, and Fancy let his nose touch her fingers. He barked once more and wagged his tail, then put his front paws on the table and stared at her as he drooled.

Eugene picked up a spoon and shoveled thick, buttery potatoes with thick slices of cabbage into her mouth as quickly as she could. She stopped only long enough to set a bowl of stew, still warm, on the floor for her companion.

“Don’t suppose you’d know if there are any clothes around here I could borrow?”

Fancy scarfed down the last few bites of food, then ran down a hall. Eugene stopped eating at the sound of cheering.

“Sounds like they got Ed and his kids,” she mumbled, putting the spoon down. “Someone will be here soon. You ready to go?”

Fancy pranced back into the room with a brown tunic in his mouth.

“Thanks,” Eugene said, taking it and throwing it over her head. “At least it covers the arms and most of the legs. It’ll have to do for now.”

Eugene took one more bite and froze. Something very sharp pushed against her back, just shy of piercing her skin. She looked down at Fancy. “I thought you were helping me.”

Fancy barked as the man's voice said, “Breathe and I’ll run this through your heart.”

Eugene recognized the voice of the captain of Cadence’s unit. She raised her hands and turned her head to look over her shoulders. As she did, the tunic’s long sleeves dropped to her elbows, and the neckline twisted. Holding her breath, she looked for a collar on the man’s neck, but it wasn’t there. Her eyes narrowed, and she sneered.

“You’re one of them.” Her Werewolf growled in her throat. “Enslaving your own kind.”

The man’s eyes were fixed on Eugene’s arms and neck. A second later, his sword fell to the ground, and he dropped to one knee and bowed his head. “The Painted Wolf.”

Eugene's Wolf growled again, but then softened as the man's back vibrated with fear.

He lifted his head just enough to look at her. "I swear I've never enslaved anyone. Kill me—I deserve it—but please protect my family."

Eugene's Wolf roared in her throat, but Eugene clenched her jaw to hold it back and banged her fist on the table instead. It shattered.

"How do they make someone like you serve them?"

"My uncles, both Wolves, were forced into it. My father wasn't a Wolf, but the Witches saw I was," the captain said. "I had the choice of serving or watching my kin killed. I have kids; when their mother died, my husband and I adopted them. I served with their father. He was a good man, and a good Wolf, but he was also forced to serve. I don't want this for them."

Fancy barked near the door. The captain stood and looked outside.

"It's the Witch who came to raise the rubble. Hide!"

He pointed to the hall Fancy had come out of when he brought her the tunic and led her into a small room. Once there, Eugene didn't move. Tan and green eyes stared back at her, but they were filled with a fear no Wolf should ever know. Her anger faded as survival instincts took over.

"Under the bed," the captain said.

Eugene slid under the bed as the voice of the Witch reached her.

"Captain Gaughan, is there anyone else in the house?"

"Not in the kitchen, Lady Uflora. I'm checking the bedroom now."

Gaughan slid a dresser to the side, then picked up the one chair in the room from where it had toppled and stood it upright. He lifted the bedcovers, knelt down, and stared at Eugene.

"No one except a stupid dog barking for no reason but to make himself heard."

Behind Gaughan, a long, white skirt glided into the room. "Good. No deaths this time, praise the Mother. Your husband is

well: bruised and stunned, a few broken ribs, but nothing I can't heal. The children, of course, think it's a game. Bless all children for their innocence. You are a fortunate man."

"Praise the Mother," he answered. "I'm a fortunate man."

Lady Uflora made no motion to leave. She let out a long, audible sigh. "I'm sorry about your store. I've already sent for a crew to begin the repairs."

A child's feet padded near the bed. "Pops!"

Eugene held her breath as the child drew closer and dropped a doll, but Gaughan reached down and picked the child and the doll up in one swoop.

"Please forgive her. All this excitement—"

Lady Uflora laughed and cooed at the child. "Such a brave little girl. You weren't scared at all, were you?"

"No," said the child. "Pretty doggie."

Gaughan quickly said, "Yes, the pretty doggie is here. Let's go play with him." Lady Uflora laughed, and as they exited the room, Gaughan shouted, "Fancy can stay here for now, Cadence! Better he's out of the way than leading us to people who don't need our help. No doubt, he'll head to the Dragon House soon. Usually gets a good meal there."

EUGENE SHUFFLED HER FEET, imitating the orange-clad monks surrounding her. She kept her shoulders stooped and bowed her head even though several of the men were almost as tall as her. The long, heavy garment dragged the ground behind her, and its hood hung almost as long as her sleeves. The only thing she could see was the ground.

It was almost dawn when she finally left Gaughan's house. The street had filled with people carrying food and water to survivors and those providing aid. Lady Uflora had been wrong about the dead. Eugene counted three bodies carried under blankets as she

waited for the street to clear. Just before the first light of day, sixteen Dragon Monks shuffled past Gaughan's house and paused when one of them stumbled. Fortunately, they didn't seem to walk in any particular formation or sing any chants. They just made their way along paved roads until they reached the edge of the village and turned on a dirt road.

A dragon screamed again. With each step closer to the Dragon House, the hair on Eugene's arms and neck stood on end. Her Wolf grumbled in her gut, but she kept it in check. At one point, her Wolf shivered, and she shook her head to keep it under control.

A monk next to her mumbled, "Peace, brother. We'll be there soon."

Eugene bowed her head to the monk and continued shuffling with the others. Lanterns were spaced along this dirt road, but not as many as were in the town, and the thickening trees blocked the early morning light. The scent of trees, ferns, and decomposing leaves filled her nose. The whoosh of feathers flapping in the breeze and tiny feet scurrying into dens reached her ears. The forest and all its life grew around her. Even hunched over, her muscles eased.

She almost let out a sigh before a roar burst in her eardrums. The monks halted, and all of them but Eugene bowed.

The monk in the lead turned to face the group. "He waits for us, brothers. We continue."

Eugene's heart was still pounding when she heard a voice she didn't want to hear.

"Peace, brothers."

Eugene dared lift the edge of her hood to look as Gaughan hurried past the monks toward the Dragon House. Its outer wall rose high above the trees, and the morning light glowed gold against the upper stones. The front gate opened, and a soldier with a dragon on his breastplate stepped out. Gaughan nodded to the officer, but they said nothing. Eugene wiped the sweat off her brow and tugged her hood lower over her face.

"Welcome, brothers," the dragon officer said.

The lead monk bowed. “We are ready, Captain Peren.”

Eugene bit her lip and turned her head, trying to see around her even as she continued to shuffle along with the monks. Just before the open gate, scorched earth and charcoal tree stumps provided a natural clearing. She would make her getaway just before the road opened to it.

She rolled her shoulders readying to run when two of the brothers behind her tripped into her. This led Eugene to fall onto the monk in front of her.

A firm hand gripped her left arm. “Are you alright, brother? Let me help you.”

Eugene nodded at Peren as two soldiers helped the other monks to their feet. He didn’t let go of her arm as they entered the Dragon House, and Eugene gulped as the massive doors banged shut behind her.

Peren shouted, “Put those lanterns out! The brothers need the dark.”

At once, the great hall darkened. Peren tugged on Eugene’s arm and forced her to follow him through a narrow door. The door slammed shut behind them.

“You made it,” came Gaughan’s voice.

Peren snorted. “I thought Wolves were supposed to be able to move around without being seen.”

Eugene pulled her hood back and grumbled, “You try walking in this thing. It’s hotter than hell. How do they stand moving around in this heavy thing?” She glared at Gaughan. “And what are you doing here?”

Gaughan chuckled. “I told you to come here. I thought Fancy might lead you, stupid dog. Besides, where else are you going to go in a Dragon Monk’s robe. The monk’s alright, by the way. Nasty bruise on his neck, but he’s not too upset about missing his appointment here. He won’t be alerting anyone about you.”

Eugene let the robe fall to the floor. The brown tunic she still wore was sweaty and clung to her back. “And you haven’t?”

Gaughan bowed low. “No, I’ve been waiting my whole life for you. We all have.”

Heat rushed to Eugene’s cheeks. “I wish everybody would stop that. They’re just tattoos. Lots of people have them where I’m from.”

Peren murmured, “No one here does.”

Eugene looked at him, and he lowered his head, turning so she could see only the right side of his face. Running her hands through her hair and shaking off the sweat, she said, “The alignment is less than five days away. I have to get things ready here.”

Gaughan raised his eyebrows. “What do you need me to do?”

Eugene rolled her eyes. “I have to get Ari and Arika away from the Witches and to the Heart of Mother. Will you help me?”

Peren turned to face her head-on, and Eugene’s jaw dropped. She stared, then smiled.

“Finally met someone uglier than Mike. I’m Eugene,” she said, holding out her hand.

Peren smiled with the right side of his mouth; the left side was only a slit that perked up. His left eye was white and didn't move. The right side of his face, not covered with a beard, was smooth and pale, and his green eye glowed in the lantern light.

Peren looked from Gaughan to her, then took her hand in his and bowed.

“Ew!” Eugene quickly pulled her hand away, and Peren lowered his head.

“Sorry.” Eugene picked up his hand and shook it. “This is what we do where I’m from. I really don’t like this bowing thing.”

Gaughan said, “Peren is captain of the Dragon Guard. As you can see, he’s been burned by Dragons more than once.”

“Obviously,” said Eugene. “Still, on the right side, you’re a looker. Mike—a friend from back home—isn’t a looker on his good side.” She picked up the orange robe. "So, you guys helping me, or not? And why is this thing so heavy?”

“Whatever you need,” Peren said with a slight bow of his head.

"I follow the Painted Wolf," said Gaughan. “All free Wolves will.”

“Except a few,” said Eugene.

Gaughan nodded. “Except a few, but I know who they are. They will not stop you from freeing us all.”

Eugene forced a grin and pulled her shoulders back. “I’m not going home until everyone’s free.”

She tossed the robe to Peren just as another roar stabbed at her heart. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath. When she opened them, she looked at Gaughan, who, like her, rolled his shoulders and shook his head in an effort to keep his Wolf in check.

Peren remained still, staring at Eugene, but not seeing her. “You asked why the robes are so heavy. Let me show you what you’re fighting for.” Peren tapped on the wall behind Eugene opening a narrow panel, then picked up the small lantern from the table behind him. “Follow me.”

They walked single file down a pitch-black hall. She avoided looking directly at Peren’s lantern, and watched his gray outline. For a man who had more than a few fights in his life, he moved with stealth and purpose. From behind her, Gaughan explained they were in an evacuation tunnel meant to be used when a dragon got loose. She soon lost her bearings, but recognized they walked in a wide arch. The dragon screamed again. This time, she was ready for it and only paused for a moment until she heard the distinctive cry of a man in pain.

Her throat constricted, but she forced out, “You pissing off more than dragons here?” Then, stopping to turn to Gaughan, she added, “Are Werewolves treated like this?”

Peren grabbed her shoulder and spun her around; although his one good eye was well below her chin, it burned with anger. “No, I don’t. I wouldn’t, and neither would he. Get that through your thick skull.”

He turned and continued walking.

Eugene pursed her lips before saying, “Sorry. It’s that noise. It’s

doing something to my Wolf. I want to trust you." She gave Gaughan a quick glance. "Both of you."

Peren sighed. "I know. I see it every time something goes wrong and the Witches send the Wolf Soldiers here to distract a dragon."

Gaughan added, "We thought at first the dragons wouldn't bond with anyone because there were so many Wolves in the city. Witches even sent us away when a dragon hatched, but it made no difference. What's wrong with this one, Peren? I thought you said the Dragonflies were hopeful."

Eugene asked, "Dragonflies?"

"They look a little like a cross between a Goblin and a Fae," said Peren. "They show up whenever a dragon hatches. Odd sort of folk: no one knows where they come from. Don't talk to anyone, either. All they do is take care of young dragons."

"But they've talked to you," said Eugene.

They came to the end of the narrow hallway. Eugene was sure there was a door hidden by some kind of magic, but before Peren opened it, he turned to her.

"Gaughan's the only person I've told. I hope you honor my trust."

Eugene smiled as her chest puffed out just a little. Remembering what she'd seen other people in the Wildes do, she bowed her head.

When the wall behind Peren disappeared, Eugene frowned, having missed what he did.

"You asked why their cloaks are so heavy," said Peren, pointing below them to an open arena.

"It's made of a material meant to not burn when dragons breathe fire on it," said Gaughan. "At least, not right away."

As Eugene's eyes adjusted to the bright light around her, she scanned a massive arena surrounded by smooth stone walls.

"No bleachers? I mean, seats?"

Gaughan pointed below them to the rock and sand floor. "Watch. You'll see why."

A door she couldn't see opened, and five monks shuffled into the

center of the ring.

“So they’re just going to hang out with dragons and try not to get eaten? Are those the dragons?” she asked as she pointed to two thin, winged creatures with two legs, two arms, and angry looking faces.

“Dragonflies,” Peren said.

At that moment, three other Dragonflies floated down from massive stone rafters at the top of the dome filled with light but not sky. The same painful roar vibrated through Eugene, and she shook her head.

“So much pain,” she whispered.

“He’s lonely,” said Peren. “The Dragonflies take good care of him, but something’s wrong. This is the first dragon to hatch and live into his adolescent years. He needs to bond.”

The floor beneath their feet shuddered, and the sounds of iron and stone scraping together echoed throughout the dome. Another Dragonfly fluttered out from an opening that wasn't there before.

“Here he comes,” said Peren. “Don’t make a sound. He can’t see us here, but he can hear us.” Eugene opened her mouth to ask why when Peren raised his hand and whispered. “A spelled veil.”

Eugene nodded, muttering, “Everything here is so weird. No offense: I suppose it all seems perfectly normal to you. Please tell me they’re not going to get eaten.”

Gaughan put his finger to his mouth, and Eugene nodded, placing her fingers over her lips.

The monks spread out into a semicircle. Their heavy robes shook as though they were filled with wind, their fear filled Eugene’s nose.

With another great roar. The dragon flew out of its cage, gliding up and around until it landed on the highest of the scarred, scratched beams. Its claws slashed across the stone, sending out a soft cloud of dust. Three of the Dragonflies flew up to circle it.

Eugene tilted her head and listened. “They’re singing.”

Peren turned to her with a raised eyebrow, nodded, then returned to watching the dragon. The song soothed Eugene’s

Werewolf; she sighed as her shoulders relaxed, but then the song changed.

The combined voices of the Dragonflies squealed and scratched. The stench of the monks' fear grew; Eugene and Gaughan cringed and closed their eyes as their necks and shoulders tensed. With another change of tone, the voices of the Dragonflies rose in harmony, but this time the song did not bring comfort. It urged for a choice to be made. Eugene forced her eyes open to watch. Her heartbeat increased, and her breath shortened.

"Choose what?" she muttered. Her heartbeat increased. "What do I choose?"

The dragon roared, shooting flames at the monks as he made a single, low pass over the monks before flying into his hole. Metal and stone grated as the steel bars slid into place, but Eugene barely heard it over the screams of the men below her.

"What the hell was that about?"

Peren's head and shoulders drooped. "If a dragon is to be ridden, it must bond with its handler as an adolescent. Otherwise, it will never allow anyone to ride it."

"So," spat Eugene, "these idiots just stand there and hope a dragon will bond with one of them? That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard." She glared at Peren, then Gaughan, who bowed his head. "Like, how many times does this happen?" She paused, squinting as the Dragonflies picked up the dead and injured, flying them through a door she couldn't see. "You're going to kill the dragon if it doesn't bond, aren't you?"

Peren pulled himself upright and turned to her. "Another reason to help you. I can't do it again." He suddenly turned and peered down the hall they'd come from. "Someone's coming."

Boots jogged toward them, the sound barely perceptible except for the softest crunch of something soft against gravel.

"Wolf Soldier," answered Eugene.

Peren put his hand on his long knife, but Gaughan made for the threshold of the tunnel and said, "One of mine."

Eugene caught the growl in her throat from escaping as her eyes fell on the collar around Cadence's neck.

"You were missed," she said by way of greeting, until she noticed Eugene. She lowered her eyes. "My apologies for interrupting."

"What's happened?" Peren asked, pushing past Eugene.

Eugene pulled on Gaughan's arm. "She's wearing a collar!"

The soldier looked up and smiling so wide Eugene thought her face would break. She pulled the collar off her neck. "I was in the forest when you and the red-haired Witch freed us."

"That's how we knew you were coming," Gaughan said. "But that story can wait. What's happened?"

Cadence's smile vanished as she turned her attention back to her captain. "Queen Diviva announced the Goblins caused the quake and intended to take the twins back to another world, thus ensuring the Witches wouldn't be able to heal Mother during the alignment. There was fighting. All Goblins were taken."

"Arrested?" Peren asked.

Eugene gasped. "Ari, too?"

"No one's certain about the prince," Cadence replied. "My contact says he's not in the dungeon."

"Dungeon!" Eugene pressed her hand to her chest. "Your queen wouldn't put her own nephew in the dungeon."

Peren lifted his hands and pulled her close to her head whispering, "These tunnels echo. And yes, she would."

"Teaser? Mandrake? All the Reds?" Eugene whispered harshly before she wiped sweat from her brow as an excuse to hide her face from the others.

Cadence lowered her eyes and shook her head. "I don't know. I wasn't inside."

"We need to move before we're heard." Looking at Cadence, Peren added, "How missed was Gaughan?"

"Very," said Cadence, "I had to wait until I was off-duty to get here. Queen Ekricia pointed out you weren't in formation for the

announcement."

After taking several calming breaths, Eugene turned back to Cadence. "Were you followed?"

"No, but even if I was, it's not unusual for me to be here." Cadence pointed at Peren. "He's my brother."

"Oh," said Eugene, "but not twins."

Cadence laughed. "Of course not: he's not a Wolf."

"Let's go," said Gaughan. "I need to get back."

"Too risky," Eugene said. "I've learned a thing or two about the Reds; they'll take care of Ari and the other Goblins. I need you two to help gather the uncollared Wolves and get their families to safety."

"What about the twins?" Peren asked.

"They're smart, and the Reds will keep them safe…probably." Eugene turned her head in one direction and then another recognizing a long, slow chant. "More monks. Don't they ever give up? How long will it take to clear the city of free Wolves?"

"We can't," Gaughan and Cadence said at the same time. "Our families—"

"Will be fine," said Peren. "I'll make sure of it."

Gaughan led them down a different hall than the one they used to access the arena. This time, they walked down and out in a curve until they reached another door hidden in the wall. He ran his fingers along the edges, then turned to face the others. Peren turned the lantern off and hugged his sister.

"Mother protect you."

The boulder slid away with a faintest whisper of air rushing past. Outside, Eugene watched Peren slide the boulder back into place behind them. Another cry of pain and sorrow erupted from the Dragon. Eugene shuddered and wished she still had the heavy orange cloak.

GAUGHAN LED Eugene through thickets and dense trees, running as fast as they could away from the town. As the sun set, she stopped when she heard soft paws running toward them, but not from the same direction as the town. She lifted her hand, and Gaughan jumped off the path and under a thicket of bushes clinging to the roots of an old tree.

Five Wolves skidded to a halt; the one leading them pushed his nose into the earth where Gaughan and Eugene had just stood. It barked once, and Gaughan leaped to his feet, motioning Eugene to do the same, but both froze as soon as three High Guardsmen ran toward them.

All three were out of breath when they came to a halt in front of them, but the youngest spoke between gasps for air.

"We found you," he said with a smile that sent a wave of relief to both Gaughan and Eugene.

The young soldier tried to speak again, but had to bend over to catch his breath. The woman next to him patted his back.

"We hoped we'd find you." She pointed to the five Wolves. "You freed my husband, but we need you again."

Eugene asked, "What's going on?"

Gaughan handed his canteen to the woman who drank, then passed it to the young man still huffing.

"We heard the cry," she said after a long drink, "in the wind. A fight's broken out in the Dragon House."

The youngest looked at Eugene. "We need you to free the others if we're going to win."

"Damn it!" Eugene grabbed her hair by the roots and kicked the ground. "I can't—not alone." She stared at them for only a moment, then straightened her spine and grinned. "I need the redheaded woman I've been traveling with. But I'm the Painted the Wolf; I don't lose when I fight." She turned away and pulled the tunic over her head. "Catch up when you can! Run!"

Her Werewolf roared as she morphed, shaking the trees until her call echoed off the mountain.

Ari walked with his head held high and didn't rush. Teaser smiled in spite of himself.

"You are doing well," he muttered.

Mandrake snorted. "Of course he is."

When they entered the gates of the city, Teaser had doubts. Eugene, spelled once again to look like an ugly mutt, wove between the legs of the horses, barking obnoxiously until Ari shouted at her to be quiet. Mandrake added a swift kick to get her out of the way.

Eugene yipped and ran away from the group. Teaser hoped more than expected that it was for show.

Entering the great hall, Teaser smelled Ari's doubt over the dread, fear, and even hate emanating from the gathered crowd.

"This is going to work," Ari said.

Teaser reached out to touch his shoulder, but pulled his hand back when Mandrake cleared his throat and said, "Of course it will. Now, will you two please concentrate? Piercing eyes consider each step we —"

Arika's high-pitched, squeal broke through the stillness around them, heavy with whispers. "Ari!"

"Arika!"

Mandrake cleared his throat again, but Teaser shook his head and muttered, "Give it up. They are too young and have never been separated for so long."

Ari ran forward, and Arika jumped off the dais holding the High Coven to meet him. She jumped up and threw her arms around his neck as he bent and wrapped his arms around her. They spun around and around, but eventually he set her down, keeping both hands on her shoulders.

"You're alive!" Arika exclaimed, grinning widely. "I didn't know what to believe when everything went topsy-turvy. Aunt Diviva said you were alright, but you know how adults don't like to say what's real. My," she paused and took a breath, "you're so much taller…

and blue."

"I thought you might be blue, too." Ari's eyes went wide and darted between her and the Witches of the High Coven, staring down at them. He whispered, "Sorry."

"Oh," grumbled Arika. She stood on her tiptoes so she could kiss his cheek. "I'm so happy to have you at my side again."

"Me, too," he said before kissing her cheek and then taking her hand. Ari bowed to his aunt. "Apologies, dear aunt."

Queen Diviva's mouth formed a smile even as her eyes narrowed. "Naturally, you are pleased to see each other. As soon as the formalities are over, you must spend as much time together as you'd like."

"Yes, aunt," said Arika, lowering her head with a bashful blush, before she walked back to her place next to the queen as Teaser and Mandrake approached Ari's side.

Queen Diviva's voice floated over their heads and settled on them all like a soft blanket. "On behalf of the High Coven, I welcome home Ari and Arika, heirs to the combined lands of Witches and Goblins. We thank the Goblin Ringleader for seeing our nephew returned safely to his sister's side."

Mandrake stepped in front of Ari and bowed low to the High Coven. "Our Ringleader sends salutations and felicities to the High Coven. The rejoicing in our lands upon the return of these long-lost heirs continues, as we know their arrival can only please our Mother."

Arika shifted from one foot to the other. Queen Diviva placed a hand on her shoulder and smiled at her. "We, too, celebrate their arrival." She lifted her hands to the crowd, and with the most eloquent of voices, announced, "Tonight, a feast! Let us honor our Mother for the rejoining of our two lands." She clapped her hands. "Celebrate!"

The crowd cheered. From behind the Goblins, drums thundered and horns sang. Dancers entered the hall from side doors, followed by minstrels and servants carrying trays of food and drink to the

long tables and benches being set up. Ari and Teaser stepped back to avoid a dancer, and Arika waved Ari to a small door near the dais.

"Go on," whispered Teaser. "We'll deal with the formalities here. You two catch up."

"Teaser!" Mandrake scolded under his breath, but a Witch in a fine green robe approached him with her hand held out.

Teaser nodded at everyone who came to thank him for bringing Ari to them. Mandrake, also surrounded by well-wishers, made his way toward the far wall and away from as many people as he could. He stopped when Teaser looked at him and jerked his chin toward the front of the hall as the last member of the High Coven walked out, closing the door behind them.

Teaser shook his head, but continued to smile and say nothing to anyone. Only when the door closed behind Ari did his furrow his brow.

"All going to plan, I hope," he muttered before bowing and adding loudly to two young Witches who bowed in front of him, "Yes, yes, honored to meet you."

Dianttha

"You're a very pretty green," Ari said.

The twins sat with their heads close in Arika's favorite window seat in her room. The women and girls who usually gathered around Arika were all in the Great Hall. Dianntha sat on her usual stool near the hearth stones, pretending to read her book. She wanted to give the twins as much privacy as she could, but her curiosity about Ari's appearance and Arika's sudden change in behavior astounded her.

Arika sighed and looked out the window. "It bothered me at first, but then I realized it was because I was half Goblin, and it bothered our aunt, so I had to play it up. I even insisted on always wearing green dresses. And look," she pointed to her green-and-

white striped stockings. “Of course, Witches are supposed to wear striped stockings. Dianttha tried to explain what they mean, but in the end, it’s just tradition. Not sure if you’re supposed to wear striped socks or not. There aren’t supposed to be boy Witches. You can set a new trend! Oh, and look, you can see the Dragon House from here.” She pointed to the shining dome surrounded by burned trees on the far side of the city. “I’ve been inside and seen a dragon. Aunt Diviva was royally pissed off about that, but it was so much fun.”

“And very dangerous,” Dianttha said, giving up pretending to not be listening. “But she doesn’t listen to me. We’re lucky we got away with our lives.”

"I do so listen to you!" Arika retorted with a little huff. "It’s just, well—"

Ari took Arika’s hand in his. “I get it. All of this is so strange. I’m glad we’re together now. I didn’t want anyone to see me that first morning when I woke up and saw I was blue.”

“But you had Teaser with you, and he’s green. Not that I would have found that particularly comforting, considering we’d never seen him like that,” said Arika. “But no one around here is green like me.”

“But now—”

“I know, now I have my blue brother and the other Goblins.” She sighed, staring out the window. “I wish you had been with me.”

Ari put his arm around his sister. “You must have been so scared.”

Arika sniffed, “I thought you were dead and I was going to die, too.”

“But we didn’t,” Ari said. “We’re safe now.”

Dianttha dropped her book as the door opened and a serving girl entered.

“There you are! Queen Diviva wondered what happened to you. There’s a huge celebration going on down in the Hall.” Her eyes glowed as she described the dancers, the musicians, and all the food

piled on the tables. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen so much food in my life!”

Dianttha moved to stand next to the girl. “Does the queen wish the princess to attend her?” She forced her face into the haughty sternest of a High Coven Witch, despite the rush of pink filling the girl’s face.

The girl lowered her head. “Oh, I’m not sure. I think she just wanted to know where she was.”

Dianttha shifted to stand in front of the girl. “Then you must inform her at once that you’ve found her. She is here with Prince Ari. She will not be displeased that you found her so promptly.”

As the door closed, Arika stood and put a hand on her hip. “I don’t see why—”

Dianttha raised a hand to silence her, then put her ear against the door and opened it just enough to see into the hall. When she turned back to them, her face had paled. “We don’t have much time.”

Ari jumped to his feet. “What’s going on?”

Arika ran to Dianttha and grabbed her hands. "Are you sure?"

Dianttha stared down in the pudgy, green face of the silly girl she’d been told to serve, but who turned out to be smarter and kinder than any Witch she'd ever known. “If the queen’s looking for you now, then it’s about to start.”

Ari moved close to them, whispering, “What’s about to start?”

Dianttha put her hand on his arm. “Queen Divivia has no intention of healing Mother or of letting you live much longer. You’re not safe here.” She sighed. Ari’s face, which a moment before had appeared so princely, faded to a boy’s, so much like Arika’s that she had to smile. “I’m sorry, Ari. Your return to the Wildes should be celebrated. Instead, there are so many plots for power in motion that I fear your lives will not last long if we don’t move quickly.”

“We know,” said Ari, his voice stronger than his boyish face.

“I said he’d know,” said Arika, and even though two large tears

fell down her cheeks, she squared her shoulders and smiled. “I’ve been playing the stupid little girl, but I wouldn’t leave here until we were together.”

“I told Eugene you’d be ready to go.”

“Is she here, too?”

“Yes, and CC, the redhead we met just before all this,” Ari said, waving his arm in the air as if to indicate everything that had happened. “She and Eugene freed the Werewolves. They’re—”

“Stop!” Dianttha cried. “I have a friend who will get you both safely out of the High Tower.”

Ari shook his head. “I’m not leaving without Teaser and the other Goblins.”

“I don’t know who’s working with the queen,” said Dianttha.

“It doesn’t matter,” Arika said, squeezing Ari’s hand. “It’s our birthright to bring the Witches and Goblins together. We must be at the Heart at the right time, together.”

“We can heal the Heart of Mother,” said Ari. “We’re the sacred bones. Can you get word to Teaser and Mandrake? What about that girl who was just here? Maybe she could—”

Arika shook her head. “No, didn’t you see the collar around her neck?”

“Oh,” said Ari, “it looked different from the other ones I’ve seen.”

Dianttha looked out the window. “The city’s too quiet.”

Ari and Arika moved toward the window, but before they could get there, a great rumble roared from beneath their feet shaking them, the room, and the tower. The twins gripped each other before reaching out for Dianttha, catching her before she fell to the floor.

As quickly as it began, it ended with sounds of confusion followed by the crumbling pillars and walls crashing and people calling for help and the running of many feet.

Dianttha rushed to the door, but a thick cloud of dust blocked her view. Beneath the scraping of stones shifting, she heard a bang, and more screams erupted.

She closed the door and turned to face the twins, who stood hand in hand. "It's started."

"What?" they said at the same time.

"An attack just like the one that brought you here." She shook her head and pushed them toward the small door that led to the back stairs. "Queen Diviva will tell everyone the Goblins did it, that Ari came here to take over, and that Arika helped you." She opened the door and turned to see that neither twin had moved. "Quickly! We have to go!"

The twins shook their heads.

"No," said Ari. "I won't leave my friends. They need me."

"And Aunt Diviva still thinks I believe everything she tells me," said Arika, squaring her shoulders back.

Dianttha rushed to take Arika's hand and pull her away. "Arika, this is too dangerous. You don't know how powerful—"

"I've seen how powerful she is," said Arika, still looking at Ari.

"Just like Aunt Ricia?" asked Ari. "Just like when we were brought here."

"The magic feels the same," said Arika.

"But the earthquake," said Ari. "I think that was real."

Arika nodded. "Dianttha, we can heal Mother."

"We're the only ones that can do it," said Ari. "And I think I know how."

"It won't be so different from— "began Arika.

"No!" shouted Dianttha, but the twins spoke so fast and so intently, they didn't notice her.

"..what we've been doing since we were kids," continued Arika.

"Just like we do every year," said Ari. "But we won't be able to do it alone."

"Not and keep the connection open between worlds," said Arika. "Aunt Ricia will try to pull power to the earth."

"And mix it with the power she gathers from the casinos in Vegas," continued Ari, "but Aunt Diviva's actually in control. "

"Or we would have been brought right to the Heart," Arika

concluded.

"It's going to be really hard to do."

"But we're the key."

"Aunt Ricia and Teaser always did the talking when we touched the orb." He raised an eyebrow. "I suppose it's a way to focus—"

"Our minds and our energy," Arika finished.

Together, they smiled and looked at Dianttha, "Basic physics."

"Enough!" shouted Dianttha. "You two have no idea what you're talking about. This is powerful magic."

Ari and Arika each took one of Dianttha's hands.

"Logic," said Ari.

"It's like I've told you all along," said Arika. "Everything, no matter how wild or weird, follows some kind of logic. We can do this."

"I also have friends out there that aren't Goblins," Ari added with a broad smile.

"Eugene and CC," said Arika.

"Exactly," Ari said, then shook his head at Dianttha. "I probably shouldn't have told you that. Teaser says it's dangerous to know too much."

Arika smiled. "Dianttha's more than a friend. She's got skin in this game, too, so she needs to know."

Dianttha looked down at Arika, no longer the frightened little girl. The eyes before her were bright and knowing. She was the next queen.

"Yes, we're all friends," she said.

Arika squeezed her hand. "Thank you, Dianttha. That means a lot to us."

"It really does," said Ari. "Anyway, CC and Eugene got spelled here with us, but I don't think they were supposed to come here."

"I thought she might have something to do with why we're here," Arika grumbled, narrowing her eyes. "When I see her again—"

"Impossible." Dianttha stepped back so she wouldn't have to

keep turning her head from one face to the other. “Witches have orders to kill anyone with red hair. There’s no way they’d work with her.”

Arika opened her mouth to say something else, but Ari pulled her into a hug.

“We have to separate for a little while. Just be at the Heart on time.”

“Where are you going?” asked Dianttha.

“To rescue my friends,” Ari said, opening the main door.

“Not that way!” Dianttha and Arika cried, pulling him towards them.

“Escape route,” Arika said, opening the small door next to the hearth.

“If they’re not dead,” said Dianttha, “they’ll be in the cells below the tower. It’s wrapped in powerful magic that prevents spells from working. They’ll also be bound with iron rings containing equally powerful spells.”

“I bet the Witches never counted on the Reds,” Ari said, smiling. “Arika, look for CC and Eugene. Eugene was supposed to find you first, but…” He shrugged, then bent down to kiss his sister’s cheek.

Arika wrapped her arms around him. “Be careful.”

Dianttha watched the door close behind him, and her chest ached with fear for the boy running off to do what skilled warriors could not.

“Now,” Arika said, rushing to the main door and putting her ear to it. “Soldiers coming. Time to get ready.” She put her hands on her hips and furrowed her brow. “Was Ari taller when he left than when he got here? And what are Reds?” She shook her head and walked around the room, knocking over chairs and even the table in the center. “I really hate that table there. Lady Uflora says it creates symmetry, but I’m always running into it. She keeps it there to annoy me. Are you ready?”

“Ready?” asked Dianttha.

“Tears, of course,” Arika said, grinning brighter than Dianttha

had ever seen before. “It’s the waterworks that get them every time.”

Dianttha rolled the words over in her mind before she asked, “What are waterworks?”

Arika looked around the room, nodding. Then her smile was gone, and her eyes were bright and round. “We’re going to need a few cuts and bruises to make this believable. Don’t suppose you have a spell for those?”

Dianttha suddenly saw Arika’s plan. “None that would fool a healer like Lady Uflora.”

Arika nodded. “Afraid you were going to say that.” She picked up Dianttha’s small stool and smashed it against the hearth. “They’ll heal us quickly.”

Without waiting for a response, Arika, who looked amazingly like Ari, slammed the leg of the stool into Dianttha’s knees.

DIANTTHA KEPT her eyes fixed on Queen Diviva, afraid that if she watched Arika, the girl wouldn’t be able to carry out the lie, but Arika’s performance flowed with far too much ease.

“I’ve never seen him like that before.” She sniffled and wiped tears from her eyes with her sleeve. “He was so scared. At home—I mean, where we lived before coming here, we’d call it post-traumatic stress. I think it must have been building up since we arrived. I mean, I get nervous when the ground shakes and I hear those loud booms, but you explained it to me so well they don’t scare me anymore. Why didn’t Teaser explain it to Ari? Why would the other Goblins do this to him?”

Arika had kept her head down and let her hair hang in front of her face, but now she buried it in the queen’s shoulder. Her hair really was a lovely shade of green; it reminded Dianttha of the deep woods she used to play in with her brothers.

She choked back a gasp when the queen said, “This is my fault. I

knew better than to trust Goblins, but I wanted to believe they wanted peace as much as I do." She lifted Arika's face and kissed her forehead. "I'm so sorry, my dear."

Arika broke into a fresh round of sobs, her round, green eyes full of fresh tears. "I should have seen from the start Ari wasn't right. If you want to send me back to Aunt Ekricia, I understand."

She buried her head back into the queen's shoulder as hers shook. It was all Dianttha could do not to give her the thumbs-up sign she was so fond of using. The queen's expression, usually so stern and deceitful, melted even as she rolled her eyes.

"My poor, dear girl. Don't say such things," the queen cooed. "You're here now, and I will always protect you and keep you by my side."

Dianttha heard the double edge of the queen's words. Her fear grew as the image of Queen Diviva always in power flashed in her mind's eye, and poor Arika shackled beside her.

The queen pulled Arika up. "Now, shoulders back. You are a princess; never forget."

Arika forced a smile as she did what her aunt said. Her pond-like eyes, still full and wet, stared up at the queen with such devotion and adoration Dianttha believed for just a moment that Arika believed her.

Queen Diviva turned away from them to brush her face with the back of her hand. When she turned back, her characteristically stern expression was in place; that was the queen Dianttha knew and feared.

"We trusted the Goblins, and they broke all our hearts today. But you, my lovely niece," the queen smiled at Arika, "were very brave to try to help your brother. I have guards looking for Prince Ari now. We'll see him through these troubles together."

Arika sniffed and let her eyes wander around her. "What if, I mean, what if Teaser has turned him against me?"

Queen Diviva held Arika close to her and whispered, "You're old Goblin protectors won't hurt either of you ever again. I've made

certain of that."

Arika lifted her face and smiled.

"Now," the queen said, clapping her hands. The door opened and one of the High Guardsmen at the door entered. "Escort the princess to her rooms. Make certain one of her ladies is with her and put a guard on her door. She's very upset and needs quiet."

The guard nodded.

Dianttha took a step to follow as Arika walked out, but the queen stopped her.

"A moment, Lady Dianttha."

DIANTTHA EXPECTED TO BE QUESTIONED, but it didn't stop her throat from tightening and drying out, or her stomach flipping, and her nose itched so much she thought she'd scream. And yet, she opened her eyes and smiled as Queen Diviva slammed the door.

"My queen?"

Lady Uflora stepped in front of her and handed her a cup. "Drink this."

The sweet tang of a truth serum and the unexpected bitterness of a sedative made her gulp the wine down in one sip.

"It's not very good wine, but thank you," she said to Lady Uflora, who shook her head in disappointment.

The queen sat behind her massive desk. Dianttha felt the sedative slow her body, but not so much as to send her to sleep. As the burning of the truth serum dried out her eyes and nose, she was glad for the sedative.

"Tell me," said the queen, "everything that happened once the earth shook."

"My first thought," Dianttha said, amazed at how calm her voice sounded, "was for the safety of the princess and myself. Prince Ari looked physically strong enough to protect himself. When the shaking stopped, I looked out the door and saw the hall filled with

dust and rubble. Most of the lanterns were on the ground, but it wasn't so dark that I couldn't see pillars and walls had fallen." She stopped talking and swallowed hard to yawn, then cleared her throat. "When I turned my attention to the twins—" She stopped and cleared her throat again. It was too dry thanks to the truth serum. "Forgive me, my queen. I swallowed a great deal of dust."

Lady Uflora grunted and picked up a pitcher and a cup, but Queen Diviva took the pitcher from her and smelled it before taking the cup and pouring wine into it. She tasted it and looked at Lady Uflora, who shook her head, so the queen gave the cup to Dianttha.

This time, there was no aftertaste. She drank the wine and sighed. "Thank you, my queen. Shall I continue?"

The queen nodded.

"When I looked back, the room was in shambles, much more so than when I first saw it after the quake—excuse me, the attack. Arika was on the ground, crying. I ran to her side." Dianttha closed her eyes, and once again, she saw Arika on the floor. She reached for her hand, then realized she was describing what she remembered. "There was a frightened but fierce yell. It was Prince Ari. He held something wooden in his hand. I think…I think he was terrified of me. Arika yelled at him to stop, but he swung; pain seared through my legs and I fell. I could hear soldiers moving along the corridor and called to them. The rest, you know." She turned to Lady Uflora. "Thank you for healing us. I should have known how to myself, but I was so frightened."

Dianttha felt a tear drop from her right eye, although she wondered why. She hadn't cried since she was a child. There was nothing to cry about now…or was there?

Dianttha fixed her gaze on the queen, whose eyes narrowed to slits before she leaned forward, her eyes boring into Dianttha's. For how long, Dianttha didn't know. All she wanted to do was lie down. Tears kept flowing from her eyes, and her nose ran. The worst part was knowing that the weariness that poked at every muscle in her body wasn't real. She bit the inside side of her cheek until she

tasted blood.

The queen stepped back. “You behaved well, Dianttha. You’re a credit to your father. Return to your charge.”

Dianttha curtsied to the queen and nodded to Lady Uflora as she walked out.

“It’d be best if you and the princess lie down for a while,” Lady Uflora said. “This has been a stressful day for you both. You must be tired.”

“Yes, Lady Uflora. Thank you. We will.”

She closed the door and with a forced, moderate pace made her way down the narrow stairwell and along the long hall. As soon as there was no one insight, she ran as fast as she could to Arika’s rooms.

She closed the door and leaned against it, catching her breath. With a gulp of air, she said, “Arika,” but gasped.

A long blade pricked her throat, and a very red face with coals for eyes stared up at her face.

“There you are,” Arika called from somewhere nearby. “Chill, Apoh. That’s Dianttha, the friend I told you was coming.”

Apoh didn’t move the blade.

Arika stamped her foot. “Will you please let Dianttha go?”

Apoh grumbled, placing the blade in its sheath. “I am cooling my temperature, but I do not see how that will help us.”

Arika rolled her eyes and said to Dianttha, “They’re so literal.” Then, she took Dianttha by the hand and led her to Lady Uflora’s cushioned chair. “My aunt didn’t give you too hard a time, did she?”

Dianttha couldn’t hold back the yawn anymore. “Truth serum and a sedative. I need water.”

Arika ran to the spring on the wall and filled a cup. “You poor thing. Are you alright? Can you still move like you should? Should we change our plans?”

Dianttha melted into the cushions, fighting the urge to close her eyes. “Just give me a minute.”

As she moved the cup away from her face, she found another red Goblin's face close to hers; its long nose sniffed up and down her body.

"Carnelian, really!" Arika said as she refilled the cup for Dianttha. "That's just rude."

"You don't mix sedatives with truth serums unless you want the truth surrendered to dreams." Carnelian took the cup from Arika before she could give it to Dianttha. "Carnelian fixes."

"I'll be fine," Dianttha said through another yawn. "I just need a minute."

"Don't be silly." Arika followed Carnelian to the table, once more in the center of the room. "You can barely hold your eyes open. You need something to keep you sharp."

Dianttha used the arms of the chair to sit up, but her muscles were too relaxed and her spine refused to move. "I can see why Lady Uflora likes this chair so much…so comfy."

"Wake up!" Arika sprinkled water on her face. "Hurry, Carnelian."

Dianttha's eyes widened as the cool droplets hit her face and at the serious tone in Arika's voice. "I'm awake," she muttered.

She focused on Carnelian. From a pouch next to the water cup, its sharp razor of a nail scooped a sparking white powder and dropped it into the water.

"I'll stir," Dianttha wanted to say, but the armrest fit her arm so well.

She sighed in relief as Carnelian didn't stir the mixture with the same ugly finger, but twirled the cup in its hand before handing it to Arika, who then held it to Dianttha's lips. She sipped and then sat up. "That's disgusting."

Carnelian shrugged. "It works. Must drink all, and quick, before the powder settles. Powder tastes much worse."

Dianttha took the cup from Arika's hand and studied the tiny white specs swimming in multiple directions. "What is it?"

"Dianttha," said Arika between clenched teeth, waving toward

the closed door, she added. “Don’t be like those Witches who won’t trust. Carnelian and Apoh are here to help.”

Dianttha looked at Carnelian’s expressionless red face and coal eyes; there was something about the way its shoulders drooped just a little lower than they had a few moments ago. She closed her eyes, held her breath, and gulped down the contents of the cup. At once, the weariness dropped from her limbs. She sat up straight and did her best to not cringe at the horrible taste in her mouth. Arika handed her a second cup, this time filled with wine. She took a small sip that washed away the acrid, gritty taste.

“Thank you, Carnelian. That’s amazing! What was it?”

Carnelian and Apoh answered, “You don’t want to know.”

Dianttha looked at them for a moment, then back at Arika’s worried, green face. “I’m fine. Much better, actually. Why would Lady Uflora add a sedative to the truth serum?”

Arika, smiling once more, glowed happily. “I bet she wanted to mess you up and get you kicked out.” She turned to Carnelian. “What’s that you said about mixing truth serums and sedatives and dreams?”

Dianttha hugged her friend. “Right now, we’re fine. Let’s get out of here and figure out what she’s up to later.”

Apoh said, “About time. The Ringleader will not be pleased to find its heirs in chains.”

Arika grabbed Dianttha's hand and pulled her up. “I bundled some clothes and food up for us. We can change once we’re away from here.”

Apoh, standing near the door, said, “Many feet march up and down the stairs.”

“Might we make haste?” Carnelian’s voice vibrated along Dianttha’s spine.

She bowed her head and tapped on the small door next to the hearth. “Let’s go.”

Carnelian walked down the narrow stairs with Dianttha close behind.

“I’ve been wanting to see where this leads,” whispered Arika.

From several feet behind her, Apoh shushed her.

Dianttha put her hand on Carnelian’s shoulder. They stopped, and she ran her hand along the wall. Once she found the familiar chink, she breathed into it. The hidden door opened to another dark, narrow hall, but this time there were no stairs, only a winding path that steadily declined.

Once the four of them were inside, Dianttha closed the door and reached for Arika’s hand. Darkness surrounded them. Arika’s hand gripped her fingers tightly, but then Carnelian tapped a stone to a stone. Had it not been for the tightness of the space, she never would have heard the tapping or its echo, but as the stones in Carnelian’s hand glowed, Arika’s hand loosened its grip.

“Down,” Dianttha whispered as quietly as she could.

“Is this the way you told Ari to come?” Arika asked, trying but failing to whisper.

“Yes,” Dianttha breathed into Arika’s ear. "Follow the light in Carnelian’s hand."

The path curved to their left, and Carnelian raised a hand for them to stop. Dianttha bent her ear toward the wall. Voices, soft and careless, traveled through the stone from ahead of them. She nodded, and Carnelian led them on.

“I hate guard work,” said a voice muffled by stone, but clearly aggravated and weary.

“What did you do to get stuck down here?” asked a second, equally bored voice.

“Got a glimpse…” The first voice trailed off for a long yawn. “A glimpse of high-and-mighty throwing her latest tantrum.”

Arika gasped, and Dianttha turned to her with puffed cheeks and a hand clamped tightly over her mouth.

“You hear something?” the second voice asked, then yawned.

Carnelian muttered into its clawed hand wrapped around the glowing stone; the other fanned over it as if to send its words down the hall.

The second voice yawned again. “Damn it, Tush. Now you’ve got me yawning.”

The sound of skin on cloth trickled to their ears.

Tush grunted as if startled. “I’m awake.”

Dianttha closed her eyes and listened to Carnelian’s whispers. No words came from his mouth, only a melody of sleep that drifted like a feather on the tones of Mother’s Song floating in the air. She smiled. The next sound was a distinctive, soft snore.

They hurried forward. Just before the light extinguished, she saw what could only be a smile on Carnelian’s face.

TEASER

“A most unfortunate situation,” said Mandrake. He lifted his arm to wipe away a drop of blood that had just reached his eye and cringed at the clanking of the chain dangling from his wrist. “And to think we are denied even the semblance of courtesy.”

“It’s not as though we expected a warm greeting, but this,” Teaser lifted his own arm to tap an iron collar around his neck, “I had hoped would not be our reception.”

Mandrake shrugged. “You have dwelt off world far too long. The thin line of trust between us and the Witches is now broken.” He spat blood on the floor, then slid his jaw from side to side. “Teeth are missing. It will take many weeks to fully regrow them.”

“Assuming we live that long.” Teaser tilted his head. “Do you hear snoring?”

Mandrake, staring into the darkness, answered, “If someone here can sleep well, let them sleep. You realize that the spells encapsulating us may well prevent the Reds from locating us. Even if they succeed, the same spells that prevent our escape may well prevent theirs.”

Teaser nodded. “I have indeed thought of these things, and my reply requires I lay certain facts before you. First, I am much relieved to be here with you, because it means you are not dining

with the Witches of the High Coven."

"Me?" gasped Mandrake, raising the eyebrow over his right eye; the left one still bled. He grunted, then sighed. "I suppose there was a time…but I had hoped you now thought better of me."

"No offense ," exclaimed Teaser. "From this point on, in whatever time we are allotted, I name you friend. For, if you were not here with me, you would be collaborating with the High Coven to ensnare and prevent the righteousness of our wards claiming their birthright."

Mandrake nodded. "A fairer assessment of my behavior is seldom offered. I take no offense and give my thanks for your honesty. And the next part of your answer?"

"My faith in the Reds exceeds yours. They will be here soon, despite—not because of—the suppression spells upon this place," Teaser claimed. "If the spells cast here were so strong, our captors would not need to trap our limbs and necks with cursed iron."

"I should have such faith in friends," sighed Mandrake.

"Proof of friendship comes to you, my friend," Teaser said with a grin spread ear to ear. "The door opens not with the aid of a key forged by Witch or Goblin."

"Teaser!" Arika and ran through the cell, dropped to her knees in front of Teaser, and wrapped her arms around his neck. "You're alive! I was so worried about you, and so much is happening—"

"She has no understanding of the need for silence," Apoh explained, making Teaser laugh.

Arika narrowed her eyes. "We have to get these chains off."

Dianttha smiled. "Carnelian, can you unchain them?"

Carnelian squatted next to Mandrake. "Let me heal you first."

"Chains first," said Mandrake. "I will heal myself."

Apoh leaped to Arika's side and pulled her close. "Witches," he muttered before disappearing into the stone wall.

Dianttha thrust her back against the same wall, but she was too far away from them to meld into it with them. The cell door next to her opened.

Lady Uflora's fingers wrapped around her arm like claws.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

Dianttha tried to pull away, but her nails bit through her sleeve.

"I always knew you were stupid, but betraying your own kind—"

Dianttha's rage, so long buried, shot through her veins. "You're the one too stupid to see what's going on in front of you. You're as bad as your dear friend up there, grabbing power for the sake of having power, not carrying how many families you destroy. I've had enough of you!"

Her ears roared with the notes of anger, mixed with the song of vengeance, and her core burned to release it.

"Hold your tongue, girl!" shouted Lady Uflora. "Or do you want to announce your betrayal to everyone in the High Tower?"

Dianttha barely heard Lady Uflora's words or felt the sting of her hand when she slapped her. The song still filled her ears and leaked out of her skin.

Lady Uflora flew across the room and into the far wall, hitting it with a loud crack. The darkness of the room turned red before Dianttha's eyes until it shattered as a frightened, sweet voice broke through her haze.

"Please don't, Dianttha."

She looked down at Arika's childlike face; her fingers were laced with her own, and the rage faded back to a slow, livable anger as the quiet, sympathetic tones of Arika's melody, full of life and love and innocence filled her ears.

"Neither of us," Mandrake said, "is well-versed in making friends, are we, Mother?"

Dianttha and Arika gasped at Mandrake, asking, "Mother?"

Lady Uflora moaned as her hand went to her head. "It's hardly a secret. Although, I do not boast of my Goblin son."

"Son," Arika echoed. "That's why you never talk about your children."

Apoh, standing guard at the door, said, "Perhaps an explanation

on reproductive habits between the Peoples can wait? The guards are awake and coming this way."

"I thought it was you who put them to sleep," Lady Uflora said to Mandrake. "I shall have to speak with the Coven about engaging the Reds to provide better security."

"Dianttha?" asked Arika, "are you okay?"

Dianttha watched Carnelian remove the shackles from Teaser while Lady Uflora healed Mandrake's wounds and did not move away from him until she touched her forehead to his.

"Yes," said Dianttha, "I'm better now. Thank you."

"Thank you, Mother," Mandrake said.

Lady Uflora bowed her head as Mandrake clamped the heavy iron ring that had been around his neck about hers.

"May we go now?" Carnelian asked from the wall opposite the exit. Without waiting for an answer, it and Apoh both put their hands on the wall, causing it to shimmer. "Quickly."

Arika's grip on Dianttha's hand tightened. "We're going inside the rock."

Dianttha swallowed a flash of fear and squeezed Arika's hand back. "Don't let go."

"WAKE UP," a familiar and unpleasant voice trilled.

Dianttha rubbed her eyes; the fingers of her right hand ached as though they'd been cramped.

"Is she going to be alright?" asked Arika.

"I'm fine," Dianttha muttered, sitting up.

Kneeling beside her, Mandrake removed his hand from her forehead. "You fainted."

Arika wrapped her arms around Dianttha's neck. "I was so afraid something bad had happened to you." Pulling away, her green face flushed and her eyes brightened. "We're in the Dragon House! Carnelian and Apoh took us all the way through the mountain to

get here. The dragon's very unhappy. He keeps crying and crying. Nothing is calming him and my aunt will order him killed if we don't think of something fast."

"She may order it," said a familiar voice, "but I won't do it."

Dianttha smiled as Peren reached out to help her stand.

"The princess is right," he continued. "The last of the monks has tried to bond with him, and now the dragon refuses to return to his cell."

"Of course he does," said Arika. "He's not stupid. He knows what's coming. We have to get him away from here."

"We will do no such thing," Mandrake argued. "He'll burn down the city and everyone in it."

"Would you blame him?" replied Arika.

Dianttha pulled Arika close to her. "There are thousands of people gathered for the alignment. Letting a dragon loose—"

"If I may," Teaser interjected.

Tears ran down Arika's cheeks. "Please say you have a plan. You always have a plan. You see, Dianttha? I told you he was special. He always has some sort of scheme going on. We'll save the dragon and no one will get killed, and then we can find Ari and heal Mother—"

"Arika," Dianttha cut in, "slow down. Let's listen to his plan."

Arika curled her lips into a smile and shrugged. "I know, I'm talking too much. It's what I do."

Teaser put his arm around her shoulders. "And you may stop with the waterworks. You know they have no effect on me. Let us examine our goals and consider—"

"Teaser," grunted Arika, "it's your fault I talk too much. Get on with it."

Teaser's cheeks flushed to the color of sea foam. "My friends, I hope, will forgive my brevity. We gotta get mov'n. Dianttha, I don't know you, but Arika likes you and my nose says you are not in league with the Witches. I'd rather keep Arika with me, but the way you handled the Witch in the cells, tells me I can trust you to hide

her and make sure she gets to the Heart on time. Mandrake, you help Peren get the dragon out of here quickly. If I'm right, someone is coming who can ride him."

Dianttha cleared her throat. "Perhaps Arika should be the one to let the dragon out."

"I was right?" asked Peren.

"I think so," said Dianttha.

"What?" Arika and Teaser asked together.

Peren's one good eyebrow rose, and he scratched his beard as his good eye studied Arika. "The dragon bonded with the princess."

"This I did not anticipate," said Teaser. "Are you certain?"

"The dragon's eyes have turned green. He was born at the same time as the twins, and since she touched him…" Peren stared hard at Arika's face. "Speculation, I know, but it comes from books and lore. I've never seen a bonding."

"You knew about this?" Arika asked Dianttha.

"Your song and the dragon's are in harmony," she explained. "But, I wasn't sure until Peren commented on how the dragon's roar changed in tone after our visit."

Arika grinned from ear to ear. "Does that mean I get to ride the dragon?"

"No," said everyone at once.

Peren bowed his head. "I'm sorry, princess, but you don't know how. But, if you are truly bonded, you can lead him out safely and tell him where to go."

Arika's brow furrowed as her eyes narrowed and her mouth tightened. "Why don't I know if we've bonded or not? I mean, I want to help, but we also have to find Ari and get to the Heart. Gosh! There's so much to do!"

A cough that sounded like gravel under heavy boots made everyone turn to Carnelian and Apoh, who were sitting on the floor near the door with a third Red.

"Your brother is well," said Carnelian. "Our kin followed us into the mountain and rescued him from soldiers about to overtake him

as he searched for you in the cells." It laughed with the sound of tumbling rocks and pebbles. "Your spell to make the guards sleep fell upon our young Ringlet."

Arika's face glowed again. "Where is he now? Is he okay? What's a Ringlet?"

"Angry," Apoh said between chuckles. "Didn't like spell putting him to sleep."

"Safe and with friends," said Carnelian, "at the place of the gathering. Many Wolves and humans there, ready for a fight." Carnelian's grin widened like a great chasm on his face. "We join, yes?"

"Then Mandrake and I need to get there," said Teaser. He touched his forehead to Arika's before kissing it. "You are who you are. I'm proud of you, Ringlet Arika."

Arika wrapped her arms around his neck and whispered, "Thank you, Teaser. Please be careful."

Teaser bowed to Dianttha. "I depart, Lady Dianttha, leaving my charge in your hands. Do not disappoint."

Dianttha nodded and watched as Carnelian and Apoh opened the wall and all the Goblins disappeared into it.

Arika cleared her throat and squared her shoulders. "Now, let's go save my dragon."

Arika pushed her way through the line of soldiers at the entrance to the arena. Dianttha needed both hands to pull her back behind them. Above the heads of the soldiers, Dragonflies swirled around the dragon from his perch in the center of the dome. They squealed to each other, and the dragon roared and screamed back at them. Stretching to her full height, she could see soldiers at each entrance to the arena; most held shields in front of their bodies, ready to raise them if the flames came.

"You're sure of them?" Dianttha asked Peren as he strapped his shield to his arm.

"There's not one soldier here who wants to kill the dragon, but if it gets away from us, they won't hesitate," he said. "What about

you? My soldiers are fast and will strike him to save you, but in time? I can't promise that."

Arika stamped her foot. "It won't come to that."

Dianttha stared at her young charge; she'd never heard her speak with such determination. "This isn't the selection of a new dress."

Arika rolled her eyes. "I know. I'll lead him out safely. After all, I am a princess." She pursed her lips and rolled her shoulders back, but then her face softened as she turned to Peren. "You're sure they have someone who can ride him?"

"Goblins don't lie," Peren said, stepping between Arika and the door.

Dianttha placed her arm around Arika's shoulders as the girl muttered, "But I do."

As soon as Peren stepped into the ring, the soldiers lifted their shields over their heads and spread out in a protective ring in front of them. Peren lifted his sword arm.

"Defensive moves only," he called. "Dragonflies, let him come down!"

The Dragonflies hissed and screeched, but did not move toward the dragon that grumbled, but did not roar.

Dianttha's breath caught in her throat. "They don't trust them not to kill the dragon."

"They trust me," Arika said as she stepped forward. Dianttha started to walk with her, but Arika shook her head. "Just me."

Peren turned and saw Arika walking toward him as if they were meeting for a picnic. He raised his good eyebrow at Dianttha, who, biting her nails, nodded. Arika walked past him. He looked at her once and then fixed his gaze back on the dragon.

Arika slowly released a breath. "I've got this." She looked up and waved. "Hello! I've come for another visit, like I said I would."

The dragon roared, spread his wings, and leaped off his perch. The Dragonflies screeched to each other. Some perched themselves to watch the dragon. The largest— still not much taller than Arika

—glided down, spreading its wings wide until it floated to stand in front of her. They both watched the dragon circle lower and lower until it landed only feet away from them.

Dianttha gasped as the soldiers took a step forward. The dragon and the Dragonflies roared, and Arika waved the soldiers back. She marched forward until she stood directly in front of the dragon. Peren, tensed, ready to run to her aid.

Only the tallest of the Dragonflies hadn't tensed when Arika moved to stand in front of the dragon. Its wings fluttered, carrying it forward to hover next to Arika, who smiled.

"So much trust," Dianttha muttered to herself.

"Obviously, that's what's needed to bond with such a creature," said a familiar and unwelcome voice.

Dianttha jumped and turned. Queen Diviva stood behind her and out of Peren's view, but close enough to watch what was happening.

"My queen," she said and lowered her head, but not before she glimpsed the many, unfriendly faces behind her. Aside from her usual High Guardsmen, Wolf Soldiers, some on two legs, others on four, and Witches streamed into the tunnel forming behind the queen.

The dragon roared, and the Dragonflies squealed in response. Dianttha turned, needing to know what was happening even as Queen Diviva stepped closer and put her hand on the back of Dianttha's neck.

"Don't even think of warning them, my dear. I won't risk losing another dragon."

"Yes, my queen," said Dianttha. Her voice shook. Her hands shook. Her body trembled with fear and rage.

In the ring, the Dragonfly and Arika stood as if they were dear friends talking to each other. The dragon stood on its rear legs and roared, sending flames in the air. Arika raised her hand, and he lowered himself back to all fours, then lowered his massive head to the ground keeping one eye fixed on Arika.

“The little brat isn’t so useless after all,” muttered Queen Diviva.

Arika reached out and touched the dragon’s muzzle. The Dragonfly did the same, and then they both bowed their heads. Cheers erupted around the ring; even Peren joined in until he turned around and saw the queen.

“Go!” She commanded the Witches and the Wolf Soldiers behind her. “Keep my niece alive if you can.”

Dianttha’s fear became pure rage, and she pushed her bony elbow into Queen Diviva’s gut. The queen released her grip with a groan, and Dianttha raced toward Peren.

“A trap!”

He and the other soldiers drew their weapons and turned their backs on the dragon. The Dragonflies and the dragon roared, filling the dome with their rage.

Wolf Soldiers ran into the ring as Peren caught Dianttha’s arm and pulled her toward Arika and the Dragonfly as the dragon flapped their wings and soared toward the rafters.

Arika pointed up. “The roof! Blow the roof!”

“Fire won’t hurt it!” Peren yelled as a Werewolf leaped at Dianttha; he thrust his sword into his chest.

Arika pulled Dianttha close to her. “Not fire: Geology. I’ll show you.”

Dianttha opened her mouth to object, but Arika gripped her arm and a surge of energy rushed through her. Mother’s voice sang strong and swift through Arika, and Dianttha tuned her inner ear to Arika’s song before combining it with hers. She closed her eyes, and lines formed in the stones that made up the dome; the lines became fissures and cracks as she pushed the tones Arika hummed them.

The ground shook, and Dianttha opened her eyes. Peren and a group of his soldiers stood around her and Arika as Wolf Soldiers fought with the rest. The ground shook again. Dianttha almost fell, but Arika’s grip on her hands tightened.

“Up!” Arika said. “Send the tones up and into the smallest faults. There are faults in even the smoothest and strongest rocks.”

The images made no sense. Dianttha looked up to see the dragon and the Dragonflies circling the domed roof, but the latter suddenly swooped down to add to the defensive circle around them. She tapped back into the energy Arika sent her, but this time, she kept her eyes open and stared at the roof. A crack of light broke through between the massive stone beams.

The dragon roared as orbs of green light floated up surrounding him.

“Hurry,” said Arika. “He’s afraid.”

“I’m afraid,” huffed Dianttha.

“It’s working. We’re blowing the roof open!” shouted Arika.

Dianttha forced her attention to the energy pouring into her. The crack in the dome grew wider and wider, and Arika’s plan suddenly made sense. Into the tiniest spaces between the tiniest specs of stone, she sent the song. Stones and rocks fell, and shouts of anger turned to shouts of fear. Even the angry howls of the Wolves grew wary.

A body pushed against hers and she hit the ground, scraping her hands on sharp grit. The dragon roared, and a great heat loomed over her.

“Take her,” Peren shouted.

Dianttha grunted as he helped her stand. Blood oozed from a deep scratch on his shoulder, and he was covered in dirt and dust. She couldn’t even see the dragon on his breastplate. She wiped her hands on her dress and it was covered with dust and bright sunshine.

A Dragonfly wrapped its arm around her waist, and she started to pull away from the earth, as Peren shouted, “Go! Get them and the dragon to the Goblins!”

Dianttha stopped resisting as Peren grinned and laughed. “We’re winning!”

The Dragonfly took off, and she watched the soldiers and the Werewolves chasing after High Guardsmen. The Witches were long gone.

As Dianttha flew past the broken perches, she looked below at the burned bodies on the edges of the ring. Sunlight glittered on gold and silver bangles, and one large Werewolf stood on two legs and howled. Sunlight danced over brown fur and dust, and as she flew higher, Dianttha could have sworn she saw designs in the Wolf's fur.

TEASER

Ari winced as a hand wiped the cut on top of his head. He did his best to keep his lips closed, but "Ow!" escaped them.

Spinal, one of the Reds that rescued him from the tunnels, dabbed at the wound with a damp, dirty rag. "Forgiveness, I shall beg of you later. Must clean to heal."

"It's okay," said Ari. "I know you're helping."

Spinal shrugged its shoulders. "What I do."

CC cleared her throat. "You sure he's okay?"

"Only scratch," Spinal replied, applying a salve and muttering a healing song.

As soon as the salve and the song touched his head, a wave of calm fell over Ari and he heaved a deep sigh. "That's better."

Spinal stood, bowed his head, and walked away.

CC sat on the ground next to Aril. "Don't talk much, do they?"

"A quirk of their kind," said Teaser. "How do you feel, Ari?"

Ari fluttered his eyelids, enjoying the calmness of the healing but recognizing there were things to do. "You know, I think the Reds know a lot more than they let on, but they don't like to talk much. And I'm pretty sure they speak their own language."

"Really?" CC raised an eyebrow. "I've been wondering about languages since I got here. I mean, everybody seems to speak the same English we do at home."

"I asked about that," Ari said as he stood and stretched, then reached out and helped her stand. "Teaser said I have other things to worry about. Hey, how did you get here?"

“Later.” Teaser dusted off Ari’s tunic. “No worse for wear, I see. Look, I’m sorry things went south so quickly. I had no idea—”

“I know,” Ari assured him. “Aunt Diviva surprised everybody. It wasn’t your fault, and we’re together now.”

CC cleared her throat. “So, you know how to fix the magic?”

Ari cringed and then squinted at CC. “We think so.”

“We, being…?”

“Me and Arika,” he replied and followed her out of the cave he’d woken up in and into the dappled sunlight of the forest.

As he took in all the Peoples around him, his mouth fell open and his eyes widened. Soldiers—Wolf, human, and even some High Guardsmen—picked up bedrolls, struck tents, and filled packs. Wolves ran through the camp, barking the latest news. Through the trees, he glimpsed other Wolves patrolling the borders. The Goblins he’d traveled with talked and laughed with everyone else while they, too, gathered their belongings.

“Wow, where are we? Is it tomorrow already?”

“Opposite side of the mountain from the High Tower,” said CC. “High Guardsman said it would be a good place to gather our forces. Witches think we’re somewhere else.”

Mandrake walked up to them and grabbed Ari’s head. “Who did this? Very sloppy. Give me a moment and I’ll fix it.”

“Is Arika really with a dragon?” Ari asked, doing his best to ignore Mandrake.

“She bonded with it, we think,” said Teaser. “Who knew? You become a giant; she talks to dragons.”

“And you just left her there?” Ari asked as Mandrake forced him to sit on a stump.

“Ms. Carson,” Teaser said, turning away from Ari. "Apologies—I mean, CC. How glad I am to find you leading an army."

“I am not leading an army,” snorted CC.

“Ow,” Ari said, turning to glare at Mandrake. “Spinal fixed it already. It’s fine.”

“Do you want a scar where no fur will grow?” Mandrake didn’t

wait for a reply. “Sit still!”

“What about Arika?”

Wolves howled in the forest, answered by the Wolves within the camp. Everyone stopped and waited until a soldier standing above the cave pointed to the sky.

“Dragon!” he shouted.

Ari jumped up to stand next to the guard. “And others!" he shouted down to Teaser.

“Dragonflies,” said the guard. “Coming to us."

The dragon swooped down over the forest, circled the camp, and landed in the nearby clearing. Ari smiled and jumped down to stand with the others as three beings identified as Dragonflies fluttered down to stand in front of him.

Teaser stretched up to whisper into Ari's ear, “Be the Ringlet.”

CC muttered to, “I’m giving up being surprised by anything I see.”

“Dragonflies,” whispered Teaser, “are an odd species. Nursemaids to dragons.”

“Does this mean Arika is with them?” asked Ari.

The tallest Dragonfly bowed to Ari, then to CC.

Teaser stepped forward and returned their bow. “Well met, friends. You have escaped the Dragon House?”

The leader nodded and pointed to CC.

Teaser looked back and motioned CC to step forward. “It's curious about you.”

CC bowed her head, and one of the other Dragonflies screeched and pointed into the crowd. The smaller of the two flew up before diving down into the crowd and pulling Lucrid up by his arms and tossing him to the ground in front of the leader.

“Wait!” CC and Ari both shouted, jumping forward before the tall Dragonfly could dig its claws into Lucrid, lying on his back and remarkably calm.

“It’s alright, Grandmother,” said Lucrid. “I deserve it.”

“No!” shouted CC. “Whatever he’s done, he’s helping us now.

We need him."

The leader stepped back and screeched to the other two.

CC cringed. "What did you steal from them?"

"Dragon eggs," said Lucrid. "I'm guilty of the deaths of the dragons sold to the Witches here and of the ones I sent off world"

"I always knew you were up to something sneaky, but you didn't kill them?"

The lead Dragonfly squealed, pointing to Lucrid, but looking at her.

CC stared back at the leader. "I understand. I do. There's no excuse for what he did, but he's paying for it now, and I'll make sure he keeps paying for it. Right now, we all have to work together to save Mother. We even need him."

She reached out and touched the arm of the tall Dragonfly. The Dragonfly's face changed from red to purple to lilac, and then to black even as a wisp of red fluttered through its hair.

"It's listening, CC," whispered Teaser.

"Don't they—?"

"No," said Mandrake, "they do not speak."

"Justice is an important part of peace not to be ignored. If, after we heal Mother, this man must pay with his life, he will." CC copied the Dragonfly as it relaxed its shoulders. "We're in this together. Without him, I would be dead. Let me repay my debt to him first. All debts will be paid when Mother is healed."

The Dragonflies bowed as one to CC; each now had the faintest hint of red on its head, as if they had all grown hair. They fluttered their wings, then flew to the clearing where the dragon waited.

"Does that mean they're with us?" asked CC

Teaser shrugged. "I think so."

"No telling with that lot," sneered Mandrake.

"What about Arika?" Ari asked again.

Wren ran out of the crowd and pulled Lucrid to his feet. "You stupid, old man! How could you steal dragon eggs and sell them to witches? Were you mad? What else did you do?"

Lucrid lowered his head. “It seemed a good idea at the time.”

“Come on, Ari,” said CC. “Let's go see a dragon. If Arika’s here, that’s where she’ll be.”

They crested the low rise before the clearing, where the dragon sat enjoying the warmth of the sunshine gleaming off its green, gold, and blue scales. It looked up and grumbled as they came into view.

“Wow,” said Ari.

“You can say that again,” said CC.

Whiffs of smoke floated from its nostrils.

“He’s beautiful,” said CC.

A Dragonfly pointed to her, and the leader glided over the grass to stand in front of her.

“Is it safe for us to be this close?”

The Dragonfly bowed its head and motioned for them to follow.

“Is Arika with you?” Ari asked.

The Dragonfly turned and shook its head. Ari sighed.

“Chin up, kid,” CC said, taking Ari’s hand. "Don't know when we’ll get a chance like this again. You’ll be with your sister again soon.”

CC stopped, and Teaser moved to stand next to her and watch Ari and the others approach the dragon. He studied her face as she stared at nothing, despite the dragon in front of her.

“I will get you home. That is a promise I can make and fulfill once Mother is healed,” he said.

CC grinned, and they proceeded.

The Dragonfly leader said something and the other Dragonflies hovered above the ground and around the dragon. As CC approached, the leader offered her its hand and led her to the dragon’s side,

“Oh, no.” CC shook her head. “I can’t ride a dragon.”

“It’s an honor to be asked,” said Teaser.

Ari turned to see Lucrid walking up to them with Mandrake, Carnelian, and Apoh.

CC bowed her head to the Dragonfly leader. “Thank you, but no. A plane, fine, but a dragon…”

The leader glared at Lucrid even though he remained well behind the others.

“There are few who can ride a dragon,” Lucrid said. “If the Dragonflies say you should ride, then you should.”

CC tugged at a lock of her hair. “It’s just hair.” Looking back to the Dragonflies, she said, “I’m not from this world. I don’t belong here.”

“If you don’t belong here—” began Lucrid.

Shouts and horns erupted from the camp. Two Wolves and a Wolf Soldier ran to them.

“It’s started,” the latter said. Sweat, dust, and blood covered his face and uniform. He hung back, wide eyed and stared: a red-headed woman talking to Humans, and Wolves, and Goblins, and all standing close to a Dragon. A Wolf at his side pushed against his knee. He shook himself and continued. “The queen attacked the Dragon House as the princess and the guards freed the dragon. All the free Wolves in town ran to their aid, even many of the High Guard, and the Painted Wolf broke the spell. The walls crumbled, and those loyal to the High Coven sealed themselves inside the High Tower Casino.”

“Way to go, Eugene,” said CC. “What else do you know?”

Ari stepped forward. “Where’s my sister? Where’s Princess Arika?”

“She got away,” said the soldier. “Last I saw, the Dragonflies were carrying her and her companion out with the dragon. Captain Peren sent me to find you and say to come now or the victory will be undone.”

Mandrake stepped away from the group and stared at the sky. “Too early for the alignment.”

Teaser added, “They can hole up in the casino until then. Once it starts, if the twins aren’t there to stop them, they’ll tear our world apart.”

“What about the townspeople?” Owen asked, handing his flask of water to the soldier.

He drank the entire flask, not minding the water running down his chin. “Some support the free Wolves and fight, but half the town’s Wolves wear collars, and the free ones won’t attack them.”

CC groaned.

“There’s no other way,” said Teaser. “You’ve got to get there, find Eugene, and free the Wolves.”

CC’s face paled as she looked back at the dragon. “That’s why you want to put me on the dragon.”

“I’m coming with you,” said Ari.

“No,” Teaser and Mandrake said at the same time.

Teaser grabbed his arm. “I know you want to get to Arika, but she and Dianttha are staying hidden until it's time to be at the Heart, which is what you need to do.”

“But—”

“I’ll ride with you, Grandmother,” said Lucrid.

Everyone turned to stare at him, and the Dragonflies hissed.

“She can’t do it on her own,” Lucrid told them, “I was a dragon rider. You know it has to be me.” To CC, he added, “Dragonflies don’t ride dragons. They can’t help you get to the Painted Wolf.”

CC nodded to the Dragonfly leader as it hissed at Lucrid, but nodded agreement. She asked Owen, “How long will it take you to get to the town?”

“We can be there in a couple of hours if we all run on four legs,” said Owen.

“Do it,” said CC.

Teaser said, “We’ll travel through the mountain and make it in half the time.”

“We Humans will be there in three hours,” said Peren.

“I’m going with CC.” Ari squared his shoulders and stood as tall as he could without growing. “No use arguing. The dragon will get me where I need to be, when I need to be there.” Looking up at the Dragonfly leader, he asked, “Right?”

It nodded. “Let’s go,” CC said, allowing the Dragonflies to lift her to the dragon’s back behind Lucrid.

Dianttha

The earth shook, sending rocks and pebbles down the side of the mountain and across the path.

“Quick!” Dianttha shouted, pulling Arika behind a boulder and the falling rocks. Arika tripped, pushing them both to their knees. “Ow.”

“Sorry,” squeaked Arika.

The rolling stones slowed, and a cloud of dust settled around them, covering them and filling their noses.

Arika sneezed and brushed the dirt off her dress. “Are you okay?”

Dianttha pulled up her skirts to look at her knees and brush away the grit biting into her skin. "My best stockings! They're ruined."

“Seriously?” Arika put her hands on her hips. “Worlds are about to be destroyed, and you’re thinking of your stockings?”

Dianttha narrowed her eyes and almost bit her lip not to laugh at the stern, green face scolding her. With a sigh and a wink, she said, “Not everyone can afford nice things whenever they want. Besides, I like to look my best when I’m with the High Coven.”

She straightened and turned to continue walking. She'd almost reached another curve in the path when she heard Arika’s short legs running to catch up.

“Remind me to increase your salary when this is over!” she shouted and ran past her.

“You don’t pay me,” Dianttha said with no intention of speeding up.

Arika stopped and twirled around. “You mean you put up with me for free?”

“We all do what—” Dianttha couldn’t finish her sentence. Arika

dashed back, and wrapped her arms around her neck.

“That’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me.” Pulling away, she turned back to the path. “Come on. We have to keep moving or they’ll find us.”

Dianttha quickened her pace until the path took another sharp turn right; she called out warning for Arika to slow down. Arika threw her arms into the air. “I know, I know. I’m not stupid. I’m just in a hurry.”

“And loud,” said a voice from behind her.

Arika jumped, startled, and Dianttha raced to her side.

“Don’t you ever stop talking?” asked the most unusual woman Dianttha had seen. She was so tall and so thin Dianttha was surprised she didn’t blow away in the breeze, but the most unusual thing about her was her skin. Except for her face, paintings of flowers and vines covered every bit of skin. She smiled widely. “I mean, I could hear you all the way up the mountain. It’s a good thing it was me looking for you. I ran into a couple of Wolves hot on your scent but took care of them.” The woman turned and walked away, but she only went a few feet before turning back. “I’m not talking to myself. Come on! We’ve got to get you someplace safe.”

Dianttha looked around. Among the trees and brambles, Wolves stalked the shadows. “Who are you?”

“Eugene!” Arika ran and jumped up to wrap her arms around Eugene’s neck. “I didn’t recognize you right away. I mean, I didn't expect to see you here. Are you okay? How did you get here? Have you seen my brother?”

Eugene practically pulled Arika behind her as they continued up the path, their mouths running faster than their legs.

Dianttha jogged to keep up with them. “Wait! Who are you?”

Eugene turned, spreading her arms out wide. “Nothing?” she shrugged. “I thought everybody knew who I was by now. Kind of weird, actually, everyone knowing who I am and then suddenly finding someone who doesn’t.”

“It’s just the opposite with me,” Arika said. “I mean, look at me. I’m green. My aunt gave me an amulet to hide it, but I’m not wearing it anymore. I’ve got to be what I am if I’m going to be anybody. Don’t you think?”

“Exactly!” proclaimed Eugene.

Dianttha gave up trying to follow their conversation. Each spoke at the same time and with the same intensity and the same expectations. Dianttha watched the Wolves silently prowling nearby, only showing themselves when she stared right at them. As they followed the path around a curve, Wolves on two legs and no collars guarded them.

Recognition slammed into her. “You’re the Painted Wolf!”

“That’s me.” Eugene held out her right arm and pulled back her tunic’s sleeve. “Well, that's what everybody calls me. Nobody calls me that at home. Lots of people have tattoos where I'm from.”

Dianttha stared at the intricate lines and shades, and before Eugene lowered her arm, she glimpsed the Werewolf hidden behind the vines. Though only a glimpse, she recognized a powerful beast.

Eugene’s cheeks flushed as she nodded. “Yeah, Mums tattooed my Wolf in there, too.”

“Amazing,” Dianttha said.

At that moment, a Wolf on two legs turned and pointed toward the eastern sky. A dragon glided down toward them.

“It’s my dragon!” Arika exclaimed.

“He’s not your dragon,” Dianttha said, forcing herself to stay calm.

“But we’re bonded.” Arika grinned at Eugene. “I helped get him out of the Dragon House.”

“I know. I was there,” said Eugene. “I went there to look for you, but when I found all those High Guardsmen sneaking in, I knew something was up, so…Well, I knew a fight was coming, so I wasn’t totally surprised, and I did see you fly away with the Dragonfly.” She shrugged and laughed. “I love a good fight.”

“I saw you,” said Dianttha. “I didn’t know it was you, of course.

The Dragonflies were flying us out, you called, and the Wolves came. I'm glad you were there. Not sure we'd be here now if you hadn't come."

"He's landing up there," the Wolf on two legs said, pointing ahead.

"Let's get up there," Eugene said before running ahead with the other Wolves.

Arika sprinted to catch up with Eugene, but her short legs couldn't keep up. She stopped and bent over, clutching her side. "Really?"

Dianttha caught up with Arika and put her hand on her shoulder. "Few can keep pace with Wolves when they run." She pointed at the Wolves prowling near the edge of the path. "We're well protected, but let's hurry. I want to see who's riding the dragon."

The Wolves continued to circle them as Dianttha and Arika stepped off the path and towards the small outcrop of rocks where the dragon landed. Dragonflies flew above the Dragon, and a man stood next to the dragon, caressing his neck. A blue Goblin walked away from the dragon, his head bent toward a woman with red hair.

Dianttha gasped. "A redhead."

"There's Ari and CC!"

Arika sprinted down the hillside, still circled by the Wolves. Dianttha watched as Ari ran to his sister. He seemed taller than he was when she met him in Arika's room. The redheaded woman stopped and Eugene reached for her, wrapping her arms around her neck in a warm hug.

"Dianttha," said Eugene as they approached, "This is CC."

CC held out her hand, but when Dianttha only stared at her, she shrugged and pulled it back. Arika and Ari snickered, and Dianttha felt her face flush.

"I'm so sorry," she said, "it's just…well…you have red hair."

CC laughed. "Oddly enough, I'm getting used to that reaction.

Listen, Dianntha, these Wolves will stay with you. Can you keep the twins safe and make sure you're all at the Heart on time?"

"What's happening?" asked Eugene.

CC pointed the large, covered staff in her hands toward the town. "Fighting's going on in town. We've got to stop it."

"And the dragon?" asked Eugene.

"We're flying in," CC said, putting her hand on Eugene's arm.

Eugene paled, and she shook her head with her eyes fixed on the dragon.

CC leaned close to her. "You know it's the only way to get there fast enough to do any good. The Painted Wolf needs to be on this dragon."

Dianttha's breath caught in her throat as she studied CC's staff.

"Arika," said CC, "any way you can let the dragon know—?"

"A troll's staff," Dianttha blurted out. "Where did you get it?"

"Ol'Sassie gave it to us," said CC. "She said it would come in useful. Pretty sure it freed some Wolves, although I'm not sure how, and now there are more—"

"Of course it does." Dianttha reached for the staff but pulled her hand back. "It's the key to everything."

The dragon roared, and the Wolves on two legs shouted a warning from the path behind them as some on four legs howled from the other side of the clearing.

Eugene stepped forward. "High Guard: we gotta go."

"Wait!" Dianttha shouted with such authority that everyone stopped. "Free the rest of the Wolves. It will stop the fighting."

"We don't know how we did it," said Eugene.

Dianttha kept her eyes fixed on the staff as CC pulled the coverings off. "I do."

All around them, shouts and howls erupted, punctuated by clashes of steel. Dianttha shook her head and looked around.

"There are more here than I thought. We need the right spot."

She ran toward the dragon without waiting to see if the others were following her. The man standing next to the dragon watched,

but said nothing as Dianttha climbed the rocks in front of the dragon.

“An outcrop of the mountain. Look.” She pointed to the town below and the soldiers running up the path. “CC, Eugene!”

CC called over her shoulder, “Lucrid, keep the kids safe!”

Lucrid ran to stand in front of the kids, pulling his long knife out even as three Wolves circled them. Dianttha once again fixed her eyes on the giant staff as CC and Eugene each grabbed it and stood in front of her. She almost missed the small voice rising above the noise of battle.

“Dragon, fly!”

Heat and wind surged around the rock. Dianttha didn’t need to see the dragon to know he was flapping his wings and breathing fire. She kept her eyes on the staff even and pictured Lady Gobo in her workroom.

Dianttha swallowed and took a deep breath, slowing her mind and her heart. “My teacher told me about Troll magic. Trolls are of the earth. Their staffs are made from the First Tree. Tell me everything that happened when you freed the Wolves. Leave out no details.”

“I was angry because I was being attacked by my own kind.” Eugene wrapped her hands tighter around the staff. “We both held it.”

“I was afraid,” CC admitted. “I was spelled into an old woman, and I could barely move. I didn’t know how to help.”

“Offer your help now,” said Dianttha. "Be you, right now. I’ll find the right song to send out. Think about all those families living in fear."

She closed her eyes, listening. Her breath shook in her chest as the screams and shouts of soldiers and Wolves roared in her ears.

“Listen, you stupid girl,” she whispered to herself. “A redheaded woman, a Painted Wolf: they’re unique.”

She gasped as tones unlike any she’d ever heard before flowed into her. Her eyes opened, and they floated before her in shades of

red and green and blue and gold and silver and so many other colors she couldn't even name, but they sang their song. She reached for the staff as even the earth sang.

"There," she muttered, not expecting an answer. "I've never heard a Troll's song."

A voice like gravel rolled over her, laughing and skipping as it said, "Free them."

A voice—a young, female, one she knew—screamed, but Dianttha didn't break her concentration.

"Let it flow," shouted the voice from the earth except it came from the staff.

Dianttha wrapped both hands around the staff; power rushed through her as she spread her arms wide. Away it flew, colors and a new song of freedom, a new song of life.

TEASER

Two young Witches walked into the remains of the arena carrying trays of bread and wine. Of all the soldiers and Goblins standing among the broken perches and walls, only Mandrake acknowledged them with a nod as he lifted a cup and a loaf of bread from the offered tray; one girl awkwardly curtsied to him before moving on.

Teaser sat on a perch, staring at the odd collection of humans, Goblins, Witches, and Werewolves talking and plotting.

As the young women approached CC, huddled with Maël, Dianttha's father, and Gaughan with Ol'Sassi's staff leaning against a boulder next to her, they stopped short, almost dropping their trays. They lowered their heads, refusing to look at CC even as they lifted their trays to her. The captains each took wine and some bread while trying not to laugh.

Teaser laughed out loud.

CC glared at him. "Teaser!"

Still laughing, he jumped off the pillar and bowed with a flourish. "My master calls, and I obey."

The serving women doubled the speed and shuffled out of the broken arena.

“You’re not helping,” grumbled CC.

Maël swallowed some bread. “Redheads have been the demons mothers used to frighten their children for a hundred years, CC. Give them time. They’ll learn to not fear you.”

“Especially if people from the West return,” added Gaughan.

“Not likely,” said Teaser. “So many lost more than their lives here; they lost their trust in the goodness of the Peoples. That takes more than a symbol to restore. Perhaps Lucrid. . .” He shook his head, not finishing his sentence.

The captains nodded as CC turned to Mandrake and asked, “Will he make it?”

Teaser said, “She means to ask if he will live, Mandrake. It is a euphemism for death.”

“I am aware, Teaser.” Mandrake then bowed low to CC.

“Not you, too!”

Mandrake’s face remained impassive. “CC, I must beg your forgiveness, but there is little I can do for Lucrid. His will to live is gone.”

CC nodded. “I thought so. I need to talk to him.”

“Of course,” said Mandrake. “It will do him good to see a friend, but I do not know if has the ability to respond.” He turned to Maêl. “With your permission. I have done all I can for the wounded here. Soon, I will be refreshed and can search the town. The other Healers tell me there is much need.”

“No,” Maël said, but bowed to Mandrake as his face stormed over. “No offense, my friend, but you are too easy a target. Please, let us bring those in need of your skills to you.”

Mandrake’s eyes widened, but he sat and continued to eat his bread. “As you wish.”

Teaser scratched his chin. “You often deal with Goblins.”

Maël smiled. “I lived in the north.”

CC asked, “What about being up north?”

“Many Goblins live in the mountains of the far north,” said Teaser. “They’re known for being reclusive. I didn’t realize until now they sought the company of humans.”

“Any chance these other Goblins will come to help us?” CC asked.

Maël shook his head. “Not unless it’s profitable for them. They aided redheaded humans in the last war and were rewarded generously with many deaths. Now they only deal with humans for essential business. My people supply them with grain.”

“Dragonfly!” shouted a voice that echoed in the broken arena like pebbles in a pond.

They all looked up as Carnelian crawled out of a hole where steel bars once trapped a dragon and walked along the wall to where Spinal clung to it with its claws.

“Leader,” Carnelian said, indicating the Dragonfly.

It circled once, then glided down landing on its clawed feet in front of CC. Teaser opened his mouth to greet it, but CC beat him to it.

“Do you know where the twins are? Are they with the dragon?” She combed her fingers through her hair and turned to Carnelian. “Does it know what I’m asking?”

The Dragonfly squealed, causing everyone to put their finger in their ears.

“Dragon won't fly,” Carnelian said. “Afraid.”

Teaser stared at Carnelian. “You understand—?”

CC shoulders drooped as she sat on the rock nearest her, her face pale and worry lines creased the corners of her eyes. “I was afraid of that.”

“Afraid of what?” Teaser and Mandrake asked as the latter rushed to her side.

“The Witches have the twins,” CC said. “I doubted what I saw, but just before I passed out, I saw a Dragonfly carrying Arika. They both fell to the ground.”

The Dragonfly squealed, and this time, it hurt everyone’s ears as

well as their hearts.

Peren said, “Three Dragonflies killed: that’s unheard of.”

“Only one other time in history,” said Carnelian. “Dragonflies do not die.”

“They become part of the dragon they raise,” continued Peren.

“I’m sorry,” Maël said, patting Peren on the back.

CC grabbed Ol’Sassi’s staff firmly in her hands. “The queen knew what she was doing. Teaser, am I right in saying she needs the twins for the alignment?”

“Correct.” Teaser turned to the Dragonfly. “Are there enough Witches in the Tower to form a coven?”

The Dragonfly nodded.

“Then we need to get up there,” said CC.

Mandrake stared up at the sky. “The Alignment is complete at midnight.”

Carnelian leaped off the wall and wobbled over to the Dragonfly. “They take you in. Reds storm gate. We tear and slash. Good diversion.”

“Mandrake,” asked CC, “can Dianttha move?”

Mandrake shook his head. “She wishes to, but she must not. Her great skill in magic is to channel others, but too much went through her to free the Wolves. Any more, and she will die.”

Teaser watched Maël’s face drop. He put his hands on the father’s shoulders and suddenly weighed down with more worry. “Will the Wolves fight with the Reds? I don’t know if the humans here will fight the High Guard.”

“We’ll all fight,” said Cadence. “We've got too much to lose if we don’t.”

Gaughan drew his shoulders back. “Find Eugene.”

CC shook her head. “First, I need to talk to Lucrid. Teaser, come with me. Captains, figure out how to get us to the Heart on time.” She looked down at Carnelian. “Get to the dragon. We need him.”

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CHAPTER 10
ZERO HOUR

TEASER

Lucrid lay on a cot near the far wall of the dining hall behind a curtain, away from others waiting for their final breaths. Before passing the curtain, CC smiled when she looked down and saw Dianttha sleeping soundly.

Teaser followed CC, but kept his face down, cringing as the stench of the dying drifted to his nose. Mandrake had placed Lucrid away from the others. Word had already spread that he was from the other side of the mountains, and that he was responsible for selling dragon eggs to the Witches.

CC pulled a small stool next to his head and whispered his name.

Lucrid's eyes opened, and he coughed before his voice creaked out, "Grandmother."

"Enough of that," CC chided as she picked up a cup of water and brought it to his lips. "The twins?"

Lucrid sipped the water, but coughed out more than he swallowed. "I tried, CC. I tried to do one right thing before—"

"I know," said CC. "That day I smashed the staff on your toes? You knew then we weren't what we seemed to be, but you protected us anyway. That makes two good things that I know about."

With as deep a breath as he could take, Lucrid said, "Witches…

killed Dragonflies. Tried to get to them…but they were already down…"

Teaser squinted as he watched Lucrid's life force seep out of him even as his will pulled it back in. "He needs to tell you something, CC…before his life leaves him."

"I know the Witches have the twins," said CC. "The box, Lucrid: tell me about the secret you gave me to protect. What's in the box?"

Teaser's ears twitched with curiosity as Lucrid grinned.

"Tricked them all…my insurance."

CC pulled a small box wrapped in tattered, dirty cloth from her pocket and placed it in Lucrid's hand before wrapping hers around it. "Is this what we need to heal Mother's Heart?"

"No!" Lucrid coughed. His pale, sweating face grimaced. "Keep it sealed. Tell no one." He squinted, looking toward the foot of the bed at Teaser. "Fae stones…three of them."

Teaser pounded one of his fists against his chest. "Impossible. How did you get Fae stones?"

If Lucrid heard Teaser, he gave no sign. Instead, he turned to look at CC. "Always knew you'd bring me luck. The other eggs… your world."

Lucrid coughed so hard this time that Mandrake pulled back the curtain to check on him. After a quick glance at Teaser, he looked back to CC.

"He has little time left."

Lucrid opened his eyes. The once bright, laughing eyes hovered behind a haze as he stared at CC's face. "The twins! I tried, CC. I tried to get to them. The Dragon's crying. Don't let them hurt him."

Mandrake put his hand over Lucrid's suddenly slack face and shook his head. "Perhaps he has now found some peace."

He closed Lucrid's eyes.

CC stood and sighed. "Fae stones?"

"Powerful and dangerous," replied Mandrake.

"Keep them hidden, CC," said Teaser. "If we live through this night, I will explain."

Mandrake held Lucrid's hand with the box resting on his cold palm. "I dare not touch them. Too tempting for one such as myself."

"Damn," muttered CC. She wiped a tear as it fell down her cheek. "He did like trouble." With a final sniff, she rolled her shoulders and pushed past Teaser. "Let's go get the twins and fix this so I can go home."

"CC," said Teaser, jogging to keep up with her as she raced out of the mess hall. "If I may—"

CC stopped and spun around so fast, Teaser almost ran into her. She held up her palm and took three deep breaths with her eyes closed.

"I know you sent me here to save my life, but you also knew people would either gather around me because my hair is red. I want nothing to do with your little war, but because of this," CC tugged a lock of her hair, "I'm expected to either lead an army or eat little children. Then I was spelled into a very, very old woman who needed help just to keep up with everybody—once again to protect me. I've had enough of everybody protecting me. From this point on, I call the shots. Got it?"

Her face held an anger Teaser had never seen in such a pretty face. Her eyes, so clear and hopeful a short time ago, were now filled with sadness and a rage Teaser himself had seldom witnessed. She was the right one to lead this fight, even if she wouldn't accept it.

He lowered his head. "As you wish."

They practically ran back to the broken arena, where the captains and Carnelian sat in a circle. Carnelian stood when CC approached, and he opened his mouth to speak, but stopped and sat back down when Teaser shook his head.

CC stood in the center of the arean and pounded the great staff on the ground causing it to shake for the briefest of moments. "Carnelian, you are not leading your Goblins into a fight just to provide a distraction. That leads to nothing but unnecessary deaths. Captain Maël, for now, stay here. Your daughter needs you. Where's

Eugene?"

"Here!" Eugene jogged into the arena, followed by a dozen Wolves, all on four legs. "What's up? Is it time to fight?"

Teaser caught the gleam in Eugene's eye and shook his head, but it was too late.

"It's not always about a fight, Eugene." CC's usual calm tone had returned, but rage still burned in her eyes.

The roar of the dragon reached everybody's ears. All looked up to see him circling the ruined arena, getting closer to the ground with each pass.

Teaser stood, amazed at its grace and purpose. "He's not afraid anymore."

"No," agreed CC. "He knows what we need. Eugene, you okay?"

Eugene stood still, but turned her head as the dragon approached.

CC moved closer to Eugene, put her hand on her arm, and whispered, "If you're not afraid, they won't be afraid."

Startled, Teaser shifted to watch Gaurghan. His shoulders shook, but he kept his eyes on Eugene. The Wolves who had followed her into the arena paced, but as Eugene breathed in deeply, lowered her shoulders, and let her face relax, they did, too. Soon, they all dropped to sit on the ground.

"Little to no fighting is necessary," CC said.

Carnelian grumbled, "Not even a little tear and smash?"

CC laughed. "I'm sure there'll be some, Carnelian. Look around you. There are no more enslaved Wolves, only those freely serving the High Coven. Captain Gaughan, will any of them challenge the Painted Wolf?"

Gaughan put his fingers over his lips as he stared at his companions, then Eugene. "Most will not. All now know who freed their companions. Still, there will be some—"

"There are always exceptions to the rule," said CC. "That's why Carnelian and his Reds will be with us."

Carnelian grinned, his eyes gleaming, and he leaped to his feet,

clicking his long claws gleefully.

“Our priority is the twins. The High Coven will have them at the Heart at the prescribed time. They have no choice.” CC took a moment to stare into each face around her. “We must make it look like we’re going to launch an attack on the High Tower Casino, distract them, make them nervous.” She pointed to the lead Dragonfly. “Can you fly around and not get yourself or the dragon hurt?”

The Dragonfly squealed and bowed its head.

“Good. Captain Gaughan, keep the Wolves active, in sight, and heard and seen by the Witches inside, but don’t get killed. Captain Peren, you work with the humans in the town. Spread the word that a Redheaded woman has returned for vengeance.” CC spun around so fast her hair bounced across her face and shoulders. “Teaser, you're with me and Eugene.”

Teaser bowed. “Whatever you need of me, I shall do.”

She nodded at Eugene. “Time for everyone to see legends come to life.”

Dianttha

Every muscle in Dianttha’s body ached. Her lungs forced air in and out, but the air crackled in her chest. She coughed, and vomit shot out of her mouth. Long, thin fingers rolled her to her side as she coughed and coughed.

“It’s over now,” a soothing voice said, as coolness from the fingers caressed her forehead. “Your fever’s broken. You frightened everyone when you collapsed, but I explained it was the price you paid to channel the old Troll’s magic. They don’t understand.” The voice sighed. "They never do, but you do.”

A cool, damp cloth smelling of lemon balm, amla, ginger, and spring washed her face. Dianttha’s eyes fluttered until they opened. Above her loomed Mandrake’s stern, pale face.

“Do not force yourself to rise. Rest is the best cure.”

She opened her mouth to speak, but her throat was so dry no voice made it out her mouth.

Mandrake lifted her head with his hand and placed a cup at her lips. “Warm tea, sweet with honey, and sprinkled with healing herbs: but then, I am told you are schooled in the healing arts. You do not need me to tell you what they are.”

Tea flowing down her throat had never felt as good as it did in that moment. She closed her eyes allowing the taste of spring to relax every muscle.

When she opened her eyes again, Mandrake smiled but spoke to someone she couldn't see. “I collected the honey myself. Add it liberally to her tea until she is able to sit up on her own. There are others who require my attention much more than this Witch.”

Dianttha blinked, shifting her attention to her side, to see Maël holding a cup with steam rising from it. “I hope I didn’t add too much honey. The Goblin said to make it sweet, but I don’t like honey in my tea.”

With his help, Dianttha sat up. She sipped the tea so sweet and light, it danced on her tongue as its warmth spread through her body and into her toes.

The sight of her father made her feel better than the tea did. “Pops.” She managed to smile, and after a few breaths, she asked, “Where am I?”

She stared at the dark, rock walls, smooth and glittering thanks to glowing stones set inside small sockets. Cots lined the walls to her left and right, down the center of the room, and along the opposite wall. In each of them, a man or a woman lay. Many slept. Others sat up to talk to healers, both Goblin and Witch, who mended, fed, and cleaned wounds. One Witch healer leaning over a man in the center pulled his covers up over his face. The last swallow of tea caught in her throat.

“What’s happened?”

“First, you are in the dining hall of the Dragon House, and you’re safe. We converted this to hospital for the duration. Second,

you succeeded," said Maël. "While we can't be certain you freed them all, you certainly freed all the Wolves within sight of the mountain. There are patrols out now looking for any that might still be collared." Dianttha's hand shook; Maël took the cup from her. "You did it, Dianttha. You freed the Wolves."

She shook her head. "CC? Eugene?"

Maël smiled. "Safe, and in better shape than you, although they also collapsed when it was over. Eugene's leading the patrols in town to identify those who are loyal to the High Coven. CC's here. She asked me to let her know as soon as you were awake."

Dianttha's tremors spread to her whole body and tears streamed out of her eyes, but she smiled. "My brothers…"

Maël wrapped his arm around her and whispered, "Will never be collared."

As she sobbed, she thought she heard CC's voice say, "He did like trouble…"

ISABELLA

Isabella walked through the Cave. Only a few humans watched the stills. The vamps had left at sunset spreading through the city to grab any Werewolves with collars they could find. Phin paced the perimeter of the room, not looking at anyone or anything.

"Amazing how fast you heal," Isabella said, almost jumping as her own voice echoed around her.

Phin stopped and stared down at her face as if he didn't recognize her. His face touched Isabella's heart: the sorrow and worry in his eyes that made her reach up and touch him.

"We're going to get your sister back," she said. "And we'll make sure the old Witch can't hurt anyone else, Wolf or not."

He nodded, forcing a smile. "I know. Sorry, Issy. It's the changing. That's how we heal, but it's exhausting, and now there's all this waiting."

Isabella put on her flirtiest smile and shivered at the prospect of

a fight. "Not much longer now, big guy."

Once again, Phin stared at her, but it was someone else his eyes looked for. “Eugene loves a fight, but we’re always together when the fight comes.”

“I like Eugene, and I’ve seen her fight.” She saw Cesar walking into his office and gave Phin a wink. “I’m not worried about her.”

Phineas bent down and kissed her cheek. “Frank’s right; you’re a peach.”

“Jeez, I got flatterers all around me!”

Isabella giggled and headed to Cesar’s office as Phineas lowered his head and resumed pacing.

HAPPY LEANED FORWARD in his chair, texting. Frank sat across from him, staring at the phone in his hand. He looked up and tried to smile.

“I heard you two all the way in here.”

Isabella shrugged. “Too quiet in here.”

“Always is before a mission,” said Frank. "And always last-minute things to considert.”

Isabella rolled her eyes. “Such as it is.”

“It’ll work,” Cesar said, looking up from his own phone, “assuming Happy’s people do their jobs.”

Happy laughed. “Do you know how long we’ve wanted to nab that old Witch and tear her apart?” He ran his fingers across his neck. “And Upwood: if Phin doesn’t kill him, I will.” His smile disappeared as his brow furrowed and his inner Wolf flashed behind his eyes. Whether it was out of anger, fear, or anticipation, Isabella wasn’t sure, but she decided she didn’t want to be on the wrong side of his Wolf. “My people will come through, but we’re going up against our own. I need you to do your part. I don’t know how long we’ll be able to fight without killing.”

Cesar nodded. “We got this, Happy. We’ll succeed together—as

planned."

"Or fail together," said Isabella. "We're kind of going into this blind. Are you even sure the Alignment is tonight?"

"Yes," Jonesy said as he walked into the office with Marcus.

Isabella stared at him as they sat next to Happy on the couch. "How do you know, Jonesy?"

Jonesy waved his hands, and like the first time he explained the alignment of worlds, swirls of light and smoke wove and mixed until seven spheres appeared, each circling the other, and all moving barely an inch at a time as they drew closer and closer together. He pointed to one orb glowing green, then one one glowing blue. They almost aligned with each other.

"Soon—two hours at most—the connection between this world and the Wildes will be made. My bones tingle as it draws near." Jonesy sighed as his lips perked up into a smile.

Marcus touched a glowing red sphere hovering close to the green one. "These others. It looks like they'll also align."

Jonesy grinned. "So it appears, but not yet. The Alignment of all the Worlds happens only once each century. Next year, it will happen. Perhaps you will visit the Wildes then to study."

"No," said Frank. "His mother—"

"Frank," Marcus cut in. "I can take care of my mom."

Frank shook his head. "I know."

Isabella moved to stand next to Frank and placed her hand on his shoulder.

Jonesy nodded to Frank. "It was only a passing thought. We study here with ease, too."

Cesar cleared his throat and tapped on his keyboard. The large monitor behind him opened, revealing a wall lined of weapons. "Two hours… the magic will be fixed, and we'll all be rid of the deceitful, old Witch." He pointed to the wall of weapons. "Take your pick, Issy. You're the weapons expert."

"Jinkies," muttered Isabella. Before she reached for a shotgun, she stopped and looked at Frank and Happy. "You're taking more

than your peashooters, aren't you?"

Happy grinned, letting his canine teeth gleam brighter than the handle of the service revolver in its holster at his hip. "I don't really need a gun."

Frank, still staring at his phone, shook his head. "Never been a great shot. I'd just end up shooting you, Issy."

Isabella handled the shotgun as though it were an old friend, but kept her eyes on Frank. "Will you please go call your wife? You got enough time, and if you don't, I'll bite you."

Ramon entered wearing his best shirt and tie. "We're ready."

"Classy vamp," Isabella said, winking at him even as she watched Frank head to the door.

Frank stopped and looked down at Jonesy. "You're sure about you and Marcus? I still don't see why he needs to be there."

Jonesy, wearing his human face and his kind, human eyes, nodded.

"Balance," Marcus said. "We have to have more than one human there." He lifted his coffee mug, but didn't drink from it. "I'm going to be with Jonesy freeing the Wolves, and we're not coming in until it's time for you to be at the Heart. You're the one I'm worried about."

Frank shrugged and left.

As soon as Frank entered the elevator to head up to the Speakeasy, Isabella rounded on Marcus. "You!"

Marcus stalled with his mug again. "What?"

"Call your sister—now."

Marcus opened his mouth to retort, but Jonesy picked up his phone from the coffee table and handed it to him.

"An excellent idea: you want no regrets should you have no chance to say kind words again."

"Thank you, Jonesy," said Isabella. "I'm glad someone around here appreciates my input."

FROM THE FRONT of the limo, an immaculately dressed vampire Frank hadn't met turned to look at him. "The least you could do is show you cared. After all, we're in a limo, about to enter an exclusive casino, and kick the ass of a very old and disrespectful Witch."

The stern, out to kill face Phineas had been wearing vanished as his eyes widened. He almost smiled. "Are you—?"

"Ignore him, Phin," said Ramon. "Ralph likes the sound of his own voice."

Frank glanced at Ramon's profile and swore he saw a smile.

He cleared his throat. "Didn't think about it that way. I'm Frank."

Ralph grinned and pointed to the driver. "And this is Simon. He always drives, but usually a plane. He says I drive like an old woman, but what's wrong with being careful? We own our own airline—well, several planes for exclusive clients." He pulled out a business card. "Any enemy of the old Witch is a friend of ours. Call anytime you need a flight. First one's on me."

Frank wasn't sure if Ralph was serious as he looked at the card. "You know I'm a human?"

"Yes." Blue light flashed across Ralph's face. He straightened and pointed up toward the moon roof. "Oh! It's starting."

Simon pulled the limo into traffic on the Strip, moving at its usual slow summer pace. Frank looked up but only caught the tail of the helicopter flying over them. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and thought about Jasmine until the limo stopped. He opened his eyes, but all he saw was traffic.

Looking at Phineas, he asked, "You good?"

Phineas twisted his neck left and right. "I'm going to kill Upwood. Don't try to stop me, Frank. And yes, I'm completely healed."

"If you don't kill him," Ramon said, "the Vegas Wolves will. Assuming we live through the night."

The limo stopped again, but this time, they were in front of the

High Meadow Casino.

"Easy," Frank said as Phineas grabbed the door handle.

The hatred shooting from his eyes froze Frank in his seat, but he returned the stare until Phineas nodded and leaned back.

Frank stepped out of the limo. Ramon followed, stopping next to him to adjust his tie, and pull a thin, gold chain with a sparkling gold key hanging from it from under his shirt. "It's working. Only humans at the door."

"Let's go, Phin," Frank called over his shoulder.

Phineas stepped out of the car with so much grace and purpose no one would dare stop him. The hate was gone from his expression, but Frank felt it flowing out of him. Ralph followed the three of them to the door.

"You are a motley crew," he said with a chuckle. "The grizzled Texas lawman, the sleek gangster, and the leather-clad Wolf: you're going to kill in more ways than one."

Frank filled his lungs with air to loosen the tension in his shoulders. "What about you?"

"As the best-dressed of the lot, I'm obviously in charge," Ralph quipped. They walked through the front doors without a challenge. "I'll keep the door clear, and Simon will keep the engine running. Hope to see you all later."

"Too easy," muttered Ramon.

Frank's eyes darted his eyes one way and then the next. Gamblers ignored them. Dealers ignored them. If he didn't know better, he'd have assumed there was a spell hanging over them, making them invisible. They reached the elevator in the center of the casino floor. Still, no one stopped them.

"No Wolves," said Phineas. "No Goblins."

"Goblins are staying away," whispered Ramon. "They got word there's a fight coming."

A line of eight people stood at the entrance to the elevator corridor, where two security officers were checking room keys.

"Ramon?" Frank murmured as they moved closer.

“Still human,” said Ramon. He pulled the golden key around his neck out, showing it to the guards. Pointing at Frank and Phineas, he added, “With me.”

"It's real?” asked Frank as they moved into an elevator.

Ramon lowered his shades and rolled his eyes. “Frank, of course it's real. Mrs Smith wouldn't have given a dud as a gift.”

Frank wanted to ask Ramon how he knew when three young women got on the elevator with them. All three were clearly drunk. The one wearing a whiteT-shirt with “Bride” spelled out in glittering letters swayed from side to side. One woman, closer to sober than the others, held the bride up. The other smiled at Phineas and told him her room number as they exited the elevator: Phineas smiled back at her.

As the elevator doors closed, Frank asked, “How high can we go—?-”

The elevator screeched to a halt. The lights flashed off and on until a steady red light shone above them.

Ramon pulled the door off the secure access panel and entered a code.

Stepping back, he said, “Evacuation’s started. Next stop, a fight.”

The elevator dinged, and Ramon lifted his hand. “Me first, just like we planned."

Frank and Phineas nodded as the elevator bumped to stop, and the doors opened.

“You!” yelled a man so ugly, Frank had no doubt it was Upwood.

With Frank's next breath, Ramon was out the elevator clearing Frank's path to the room containing the Heart. Two Werewolves stood guard on either side of the door and attacked him while Phineas knocked Frank out of the way as he rushed to attack Upwood.

Frank stepped out of the elevator and tip-toed around the room. Phineas and Upwood swung their fists, kicked, and threw insults as they rolled over furniture, broke tables and tchotchkes, and growled

so loudly Frank figured he would have to shake the vibrations out of his ears.

According to Cesar, the room was trashed when he left it, but Mrs. Smith had restored it to look exactly as it did before the attack.

Ramon slammed into the wall in front of him. He fell to one knee, his eyes reflecting the lights from the broken overhead fixtures, and his long, white teeth gleamed.

“Get into that room,” he muttered. He leaped forward and slambed into a Werewolf in the middle of changing to his four-legged form.

"On my way, " whispered Frank, hugging the wall until he reached the door on the far wall. One more deep breath, and he wrapped his fingers around the doorknob, drew his weapon, and pushed the door open.

In the center of the room, a globe of white light, like a ball of smoke floated in the middle of a table without a center. Across from him was another closed door: the door to Mrs. Smith's office. He closed and secured the lock on the door behind him, doubting it would stop any of the Wolves he'd seen fighting in the other room, but he hoped it would give him time should they decide to break down the door. He pushed himself into the nearest corner until his eyes adjusted to the lack of light. Soon, he was certain no one else was in the room.

His stomach ached. “Sorry, Jasmine, but shit.”

He stepped forward, disengaging the safety on his gun. From outside the door came muffled bangs, snarls, curses, cracks, and pain. Behind the other door, only silence. He moved closer to the orb; the closer he got, the brighter it glowed.

"I wonder,” he muttered and reached out his hand.

The office door opened.

“Get away from that, you idiot!” shouted a short, round woman with sharp green eyes and a snarl full of madness.

Frank’s hand paused for only a breath, but as soon as the word *idiot* left her mouth, he placed his hand inside the light.

It blinded him, but almost as soon as it filled his eyes, it disappeared. His feet no longer stood on the marble floor. He no longer heard the growls, punches, and the ripping of flesh from next door. Instead, a silence drifted all around him, and he opened eyes as wide as he could.

Across from him, but not in the room with him, was a tall woman, exceptionally beautiful, but flawed. The woman dug her fingers into the shoulder of a small, green girl. The girl kicked and cried, trying to get away from the woman. Behind the green girl, a blue kid or maybe a Goblin, tried to pull the green girl away from the woman. Were Goblins ever young? He made a quick mental note to ask Jonesy.

The eyes on the so beautiful but flawed woman suddenly turned and stared at Frank. Before she could say anything, a long, lanky, green man pushed the woman. The little girl flew out of the vicious grip and fell into the arms of the blue kid or Goblin. Both fell to the floor as the woman pulled a long, glittering knife out of her sleeve and lifted it over her head. She lunged for the children. Frank did what he trained so often to do.

He shot his gun.

Instead of a deafening bang, the shot vibrated in his ears until he could hear nothing but its echo. He almost missed a woman's voice shouting for him to get away before his gun fell out of his hands.

Just as the echoes of his shot and the voice faded, fire and ice tore through his body, from his fingertips to his heart, ripping open the seams of his existence. His chest suddenly felt as though it was caving in on itself. He wanted to scream, but he made no sound because no air entered his lungs. A great crash, like a door being broken and smashed, stopped the pain. He took the smallest of breaths. The beautiful woman screamed as an arm covered with tattoos—it had to be Eugene—pulled her towards her. Her other arm swung, and her fist connected with one of those beautiful green eyes.

The women fell. Eugene looked up and smiled at Frank, then yelled something that was drowned out by the sound of a shotgun. Once again, a great crushing of his lungs took his breath away. He bit his tongue to feel anything but the pain in his chest. Eugene's lips moved, telling him not to let go. Except, he didn't know what he wasn't supposed to let go of.

A white light flashed so bright it blinded him as he felt his body being pushed backward. The crushing sensation in his chest stopped, but when he opened his eyes, the light had changed to green with gold swirls that soon took over the room. More shouting around him faded as the colors continued to change until he realized he saw every color ever made.

"Phineas!" Marcus shouted. "Hurry! Touch the orb!"

The Witch yelled for someone to stop him, but it was too late.

Frank felt Marcus next to him and heard him say, "I'm here, Frank. Hang on."

As the colors swirled, the images of Eugene, the green man, the green girl, the blue boy, and now CC faded in front of him. A young woman in a purple dress sharpened and faded in front of him.

"I'm here," the blue boy said. He stood across from Frank and stared at him with wide and frightened cobalt eyes. "Thank you."

"Frank!" CC yelled from another world. Her hand reached for his. "Cesar?"

"He's here," shouted Phineas.

"It's time," said another voice, a voice Frank loved more than anything else in the world.

"Jasmine?" he whispered.

He didn't see the changing lights anymore. He no longer heard any sounds of fighting. He felt Jasmine's hand in his; it was smooth except for that callus on her finger from her constant writing. She still wouldn't input orders on her tablet. Her hand stroked his head, and she leaned over and kissed his lips.

"Love you," he said.

"Love you more," she whispered.

Frank sighed, glad for the quiet.

ISABELLA

"Not sure Simon was okay with you getting someone else to fly us in," Isabella said, watching the bright lights of the Strip come into view.

"He volunteered to drive the limo," said Cesar.

Isabella nodded and turned to watch him tap away on a tablet. In the bluish glow of the tablet and the red-and-white blinking obstruction lights from the hotels, his face appeared calm, as if he had no cares at all.

"Giving Ralph the job of keeping the door open? Really?"

Cesar finally looked at her and smiled. "He was an artillery officer in his human life. He knows what he's doing."

"Hmm," said Isabella. "Which war?"

Cesar placed his palm on her cheek. "You're gorgeous when you're nervous."

"You say that to all the girls," she said, looking away.

She bit her bottom lip, determined not to speak again until they arrived at the casino.

"Get ready," said Cesar.

Isabella sat up and twisted around as the High Meadow Casino came into view.

"The guys are in. If my window crew did their job well…" Cesar turned and smiled at Isabella offering her his tablet. "Want to do the honors?"

Isabella felt her mouth curl up into a smile before she even realized what she was doing. "Oh, yeah."

On the screen a single red button glowed. She tapped it. Up and down the High Meadow Casino, windows shattered. Just under the whirl of the helicopter blades, she heard emergency sirens roaring and people screaming. It was all for show, shock value, but they didn't know. They thought they were going to die.

Cesar slid open the door as the helicopter hovered over the building. Isabella followed Cesar, and both landed on their feet. She primed her shotgun and followed Cesar, who tore the emergency door off its hinges before heading down the stairs.

Either his intel was that good, or Cesar's memory of how he got out of the tower was better than he'd let on. Down three flights of stairs and then through the door on the right. Isabella stopped long enough to listen to a fight going on down the hall. The boys could have that fight. She was there to kill a Witch.

The first room was a sleek, modern, kitchen with all the latest conveniences. Further down was a bedroom. It had to be Arika's: green walls with pink flowers, a dark green bedspread on a bed with a forest velvet canopy. There were no dolls or toys, but row after row of books. The next room, Ari's: black and blue stripes on the walls, sapphire lights, a bed of velvet and silk in every shade of blue, and, like Arika's room, shelves and shelves of books.

"Jeez," she muttered. "Can't they just be kids?"

"Isabella," Cesar whispered from down the hall. She joined him in front of a mahogany door. "Open the door, but don't look in until I give you the all clear."

Isabella rolled her eyes. "Like I'm going to walk into the sun again."

Cesar smiled. She opened the door, only a crack. Cesar leaned forward, nodded, and in less time it took a human to breathe in, they entered. She stroked the shotgun, loving the cold steel and the smooth wood gliding across her fingers. The last time she'd needed a shotgun, the job went south. She wasn't going to let that happen this time.

No one was in the room, and Cesar whispered, "Her first mistake."

Isabella winked at him; she'd forgotten how much he liked to sneak.

The room could only be Mrs. Smith's office. Isabella scanned the enormous desk made with black and green marble and the two

small chairs in front of it. She smelled fear and Wolf and something else, but she wasn't sure what it was. She smelled darkness, felt her skin chill, heard a whisper.

Isabella tensed, ready to pounce, to protect, to destroy. A small door opposite her was open. Golden light dribbled toward her, and a voice, rough, gruff, and angry shouted.

"Get away from that, you idiot!"

Instinct sent Isabella running to the door. Just as she reached it, Cesar's hand gripped her shoulder, pulling her behind him. The door flew off its hinges, as a door opposite it flew open. Two bodies wrapped around each other snarling, clawing, hitting, and swearing at each other hit the floor with a thud before they rolled to the back of the room. Frank stood there, staring without seeing and his arm reaching into the bright orb of sunlight in the center of the room.

Isabella squinted as the room before her dimmed, and shadows wrapped around her. The orb continued to glow brighter and brighter even when the veil of shadows dimmed it. She couldn't look at it.

"Frank!" yelled Phineas' voice.

Isabella shook her head as Mrs. Smith ran toward Frank, but something was wrong. He wasn't all there. He stood in front of the orb, but he moved inside it, too. She blinked, trying to focus. Mrs. Smith almost touched Frank, but a great Wolf leaped over her, and Isabella pulled the trigger.

The echo of the blast faded too quickly, but the flash of the barrel lingered. The great orb glowed brighter and brighter until golden shards cut into her eyes. She screamed once, tightened her grip on the shotgun, and squinted, searching for Frank. He was in danger. He needed her help.

She fired again just as Cesar's arm lifted above her head and the sunlight faded. Isabella blinked until the pain in her eyes vanished. She still stood behind Cesar, and they were inching into the room where the sunlike orb glowed brighter and brighter.

Mrs. Smith scrambled to get off the floor and grabbed for Frank,

but her hand went through him as though he were a ghost. Isabella gasped. He stood too still. His face was too white. He was there but he was also inside the sun.

"Frank!" she yelled, dropping the shotgun. "Hang on!"

Cesar's fingers gripped her arm, holding her firmly in place.

Isabella spat, "Let go! Frank—"

Cesar whispered in her ear, "Too late."

"Quickly!" Jonesy shouted, running into the room as two Werewolves leaped onto his back. He roared, shaking two Wolves off.

Marcus ran in after him out of breath. "It's time!"

Isabella focused on Marcus's wheezing and, beneath the clamor, his heartbeat. She closed her eyes and dropped to her knees as tears filled her eyes. Marcus would be fine; Jonesy would make sure of it.

Two hands reached under Isabella's arms, lifting her to her feet. "He needs us, Issy."

Ramon stood next to her, holding her up. A flap of skin from a tear on his forehead hung down almost covering his right eye.

"Come on. Do it like he showed us. Concentrate."

Isabella turned around. Cesar stood close to the burning orb, but separated from Jonesy, Marcus, Phineas, and Frank's ghost. Ramon guided her to stand behind Cesar, and together, they concentrated, murmuring the words Cesar had taught them. Isabella focused her eyes on Cesar's head, willing the shadows to protect him.

Cesar lifted a hand to the orb. Flames ignited on his fingertips. Faces she didn't know stared back at her from far away, but in the center stood CC, her red hair a frazzled mess, but an intense longing in her eyes as she called out, "Cesar."

Isabella closed her eyes, put her hand on Cesar's shoulder next to Ramon's hand, and continued saying the words, that were bending and shifting the shadows covering and protecting Cesar.

Despite her closed eyes, shards of the golden light bit through her eyelids. Around her, the air stirred as if a great wind blew out of the orb. The wind pushed her so hard she had to lower her head

and plant her feet to stay in place. Ramon reached for her back and pushed her forward. She opened her eyes and saw Cesar's hand inside the light. It no longer burned.

"We did it," came the soft, wheezing voice of Marcus on her other side. "Issy, we did it!"

Isabella stood up straight, rolling her shoulders. The orb still glowed, but softly, like a moonflower.

Jonesy roared with laughter as he wrapped Marcus in a bear hug.

Isabella moved to the opposite side of the room, where Phineas sat on the floor next to Frank. He looked up at her and shook his head, but Isabella saw very little through her tears. She dropped to the floor and rested Frank's head in her lap.

"They'll come through as soon as they can, Cesar," said Jonesy's voice. "There is much to do."

"Isabella," Cesar said, using his charming, most persuasive voice, but she wouldn't look at him.

Eugene

"I'm going to be so sick," Eugene whispered in CC's ear.

"Wait till we land," CC answered. "It's beautiful here, even in the moonlight."

Eugene clung a little tighter to CC's waist, closing her eyes as the dragon leaned left, spread its wings wide, and caught the wind to circle the highest tower of the High Meadow Casino.

Behind her, Teaser added, "Can't say I care for flying either, but the view is magnificent."

Eugene opened one eye. Below her, the tall, thin mountain glimmered in the light of the full moon as stars twinkled and blinked around it. Below was the wide High Meadow with its farms, tiny villages, and the city twinkling with tiny, bright lights at each casino, where the Peoples of the Wildes gathered to sing, dance, and celebrate Mother.

“Do they know?” whispered Eugene.

“Know what?” replied Teaser.

“About what the Witches have done? That it could all end tonight?”

“Fewer today than yesterday believe what the Witches tell them,” said Teaser.

CC answered. “The alignment's soon, plus they know something is wrong, and they know the twins have returned to fix it. They have hope. That’s what we need more than anything else right now.”

The dragon leaned to the right, flapping its wings, and Eugene closed her eyes again. All afternoon, CC had them riding the dragon, circling the city. CC would raise her staff, and let the dragon roar its flames over homes and fields but never touching them. She made Eugene lift her arms and howl. Each time they circled the walled citadel where the Witches waited for the alignment, arrows and spears flew closer and closer to them.

Eugene threw up the first two times around the city. Now, her stomach was empty and her mouth dry, so she could only mumble, “Flying’s still not natural.”

Eugene watched as three High Guardsmen standing on top of the citadel fled inside, slamming the thick stone door behind them. The dragon’s claws gripped the stone ledge and lowered its head. CC jumped off, followed by Teaser. Eugene eased herself to the ground, patting the dragon’s neck.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

The dragon roared, sending great flames over the nearest rooftops.

“They know we’re here now.” CC pointed at the door. “Teaser, can you open it?”

Teaser only glanced at the door, snapped his fingers once, and the door flew open. “They didn’t even try to spell it.”

Eugene moved toward the door, but Carnelian's two companions beat her to it. The Red looked up at her even as it signaled its

companions forward and nodded. “You right. Flying not natural for Wolves or Reds.”

Teaser pushed Carnelian ahead. “There is little time left. Hurry!”

Twice, High Guardsmen stopped on the landings, and twice, Carnelian’s Reds stomped their feet, clicked their claws, and snarled. Twice, CC pounded Ol’Sassi’s staff on the floor, sending vibrations through the building. Twice, the High Guardsmen fled.

At the third time, a Wolf on two legs and a large club in his hands stopped them. He snarled, and a pack of six Wolves—all on four legs—formed a line blocking their way forward

Eugene stepped in front of the Reds and threw off the cloak Teaser had given her, showing off her arms filled with tattoos.

Two of the Wolves backed up. The others looked at their leader. One whined.

“Not afraid of you or your redheaded friend,” the leader snarled before spitting at Eugene’s feet.

The Reds all laughed, once more clicking their claws and stomping their feet.

“Oh, please,” muttered Eugene. Then, without turning around, she said, “I got this, CC.”

She ripped her tunic off. For a moment, her tattooed body glimmered in the soft light. Then, her Werewolf crashed into the leader. She and the Reds had their first fight.

Teaser grabbed CC’s arm. “Forgive me, but we must hurry!”

He skirted the walls leading them forward and away from the fighting.

When they approached another flight of stairs, CC turned to yell, “Hurry, Eugene!”

The Wolf leader still swung his club at Eugene, who didn't want to kill. Hearing CC's call, and smelling the blood of Wolves, she let her Werewolf take over the fight, slashing her claws into the leader’s chest, covering her face with his blood. She put one hind leg on his chest, stretched her neck and proclaimed her victory. The remaining Wolves either lay on the ground or ran to her, bowing

their heads as she ran down the stairs, passing CC and Teaser.

The gathering Wolves led them down until they reached a wide room filled with a line of High Guardsmen, their crossbows aimed at the coming Wolves.

Eugene stopped and growled. The Wolves gathered behind her, growling and flashing their teeth. Carnelian and the other Reds joined them. Eugene listened as both Teaser and CC's feet skidded to a halt behind her. She smelled the soldiers' resolve, some fear, but mostly duty. Rising to stand on two legs, the scent of blood mixed with sweat, fatigue, and that touch of fear that made her Wolf hungry. She tasted it. It dripped down her throat. As she let out a long, low challenge, CC's voice broke her Wolf's calls.

"Stop!" CC yelled and pushed to stand in front of Eugene.

The captain of the High Guardsmen stepped forward. She was almost as tall as Eugene's human self, but broad with eyes like diamonds cutting through the dim light.

"Nothing will stop the High Coven from doing their duty this night!" she shouted in a voice confident in its faith.

"Is it the duty of the High Guard to stand by while children are murdered?" CC asked, her voice soft, calm. "Did the twins return to die tonight or did they come to restore balance and heal Mother's Heart?"

The captain laughed. "The only murders here tonight are the ones your Wolves commit."

"Then why," asked CC, "are the twins in chains?"

Teaser moved to Eugene's side as her hands twisted the hem of her tunic. Her eyes burned red as rage emanated from her skin, but Teaser leaned his head into her side.

"Wait," he whispered.

"Their parents gave up everything to give you peace, not just their lives. They gave you their children," CC continued. "Is this what you want?"

The captain glanced back at her soldiers as some of them whispered to each other.

“Did Goblin folk so turn the twins against you they need to be bound?” Teaser asked. “Then you must put me in chains, too. I have borne the weight of their security since they were infants.”

Eugene held out her arms ensuring they all saw her tattoos. “Why do you stand with those who enslaved mothers and fathers so their children would serve them? Wolves are not slaves in the world I come from. Why do you allow it here?”

Eugene breathed in resolve and confusion drifting between the soldiers, but not for the captain.

“No one enters to break the work of the High Coven tonight.”

Eugene heard the hint of doubt in her voice and smiled.

“Eugene,” whispered CC. She lifted Ol’Sassie’s great staff, and Eugene put her hand on it. Together, they banged it on the floor.

The building shook, not with the mild tremors like with their earlier fights, but the earth itself rattled and shook. Clumps of rock from ceilings fell as the pillars supporting them crumbled. Soldiers fell under the weight of the great beam. Some ran away. The captain charged forward, followed by less than half a dozen soldiers.

Eugene rolled her shoulders, ready to change, but Teaser grabbed her arm.

“Leave them for the Reds,” he said, and pulled her towards the room where a locked and guarded door once stood. “It’s started.”

Arika’s voice screamed, “Let me go! No! I won’t!”

Eugene rushed in knocking down the final boards of the door that had stood locked to them only a moment ago.

“Let her go!” shouted Ari. “No! Stop it!”

Both voices were tense, weak, and tired, but also determined. Eugene grabbed a soldier standing at the entrance prepared to swing, but the soldier cried out as Carnelian ripped the man’s legs off at the knees with one swipe of its massive claws. Blood splashed on Eugene’s skin and sent shivers down her spine. She held her breath willing her Wolf to remain inside her.

“Let me go!” Arika screamed again.

The queen stood with Arika squirming under her hands as she pushed her down in front of the great, round globe of light that was Mother's Heart. Ari stood, pulling Arika's arms to get her away from the queen. Both twins had iron rings around their necks.

CC lunged for the queen, thrusting Ol'Sassie's staff in front of her. She knocked the queen forward, but the staff fell with a clatter before bouncing back and hitting Arika's forehead as she fell on top of it. The queen righted herself and grabbed Arika just as the iron ring fell off her neck. Ari picked up the staff, and the iron ring around his neck fell to the floor.

Both twins stared into the bright round light in the center of the room, oblivious to the queen pulling a dagger out of her sleeve until she grabbed Arika again and pulled her close, pressing the dagger to Arika's throat.

"You'll do what I tell you," snapped the queen. "I didn't keep you alive all this time for nothing!"

The queen stopped and stared into the orb as Ari helped CC off the floor, giving Ol'Sassie's staff back to her. The queen screamed in anger at whatever she saw in the orb. Eugene rushed for her as Teaser ran around the orb and pulled Arika to him. The queen's blade nicked Arika's throat sending blood trickling from the cut to match the one from the staff on her forehead.

Eugene heard the faintest of pops and suddenly thought of pop-guns she shot at a carnival she'd once gone to, but she pushed the thought aside as quickly as it came to her and grabbed the queen's shoulder, twisted her body to face her. Blood ran down the side of the queen's face in a long, thin line from her ear and through her nose. Eugene snarled, pulled her arm back and swung, hitting the queen in the eye even as she felt someone brush her back.

Queen Diviva fell to the floor, screaming, "Don't you dare! You'll destroy us all!"

Eugene froze, unsure what to do, and then Captain Maël as calm as if he were on an everyday outing said,

"Your time's done, Queen Diviva of the High Coven. I arrest you

for crimes against the Peoples of the Wildes."

Eugene beamed, and the smile on her face broke the fearful tension she'd been carrying since arriving in the Wildes.

"Eugene!" shouted Teaser. "Touch the orb now!"

She turned and reached her hand for the orb. There, on the other side of the orb, stood Phineas in a room unlike the room she was in. She smiled at him until she recognized Frank between her and Phineas.

"Frank?" she called.

"Frank!" CC yelled, reaching her hand into the orb, and in almost a whisper, she called out, "Cesar?"

Eugene reached forward. The orb wasn't an object at all, it was light, or maybe this was magic.

Phineas called to her, but she didn't hear his voice. She saw him smile at her, and that was enough, but the look on Frank's face stopped her from being happy. He wasn't there anymore.

"Thank you," whispered Ari.

"Thank you," said Arika.

The twins' faces looked so young and so sad. Gone were the faces of the kids she's known. Each carried the responsibilities they were born to, and each wept for a man they didn't know. But he'd saved their lives, which meant they'd saved the magic of Mother's Heart.

Dianttha

The song grew louder and louder until it was the only thing Dianttha heard or saw. Her father guided her; he didn't want to, but since his daughter's eyes saw what he couldn't, he helped her reach the Heart.

Her head pounded with the song, her ears rang with it, her muscles kept time with the tune, and her bones echoed the beat. She had to be there. Without her hand in his, she still would have found the way down the stairs, until they stood behind the High

Coven Witches standing with their backs to them. They were a blur of green and black and rose and gold and blue, but she knew them by the songs they sang intertwining with the song of Mother.

Her father didn't ask permission; he pushed them aside so she could enter the circle. No one objected, even as death hovered near. Its void hummed in her ear, and she heard the song of the queen: faint, faltering, forced to exist on an endless loop.

"Stop her!" the queen shouted, but no one moved. "You stupid girl! Don't you dare! You'll destroy us all!"

Maël let go of his daughter's hand to place the iron yolk around her neck. "Your time's done," he said so calmly Dianttha wasn't sure he actually said it. "Queen Diviva of the High Coven, I arrest you for crimes against Peoples of the Wilderness."

Dianttha paused. Her father's song had never sung so loud and true, and that's when she heard the Troll. She opened her eyes.

The redheaded woman and the Painted Wolf held the old Troll's staff. As the song skipped a beat, they plunged it into the ground, planting it deep. From the staff, a song of gold and time and healing shone bright and true. Dianttha blinked until the light faded. Before her stood Ol'Sassie.

Her girth eclipsed the light of the Heart. Large orbs like wet bark glared into Dianttha's eyes like a bright, bright night.

Ol'Sassie laughed, motioning Dianttha to come to the orb. "Time and balance, now."

Dianttha reached forward as Arika turned and smiled at her. "Think good thoughts."

Dianttha stopped her hand when she saw blood trickling down Arika's forehead.

"Hurry," Arika said, still smiling. "It's time."

Dianttha touched the light. Before her, the songs of the Wildes mixed with a soft, almost lost song of another world. They mixed, creating a new song.

Ol'Sassie walked walked behind them all. "Old and young, Wolf and human, Witch and shadows sing together. Balance returns."

Dianttha turned her head just as Ol'Sassi faded from vision. The last she saw of the Troll was a wisp of red hair hanging in front of a face as old and soft as the earth beneath her feet.

TEASER

Teaser pulled his hand away and relaxed his shoulders as he scanned the room. The High Coven Witches stepped away from the orb. He wasn't certain when they'd joined the circle. The twins stood side by side, holding hands. Both shed a tear for the man they didn't know, but watched die.

"Teaser," whispered Ari, his eyes wide and sad.

"Who was that?" Arika asked.

"And where did Aunt Ekricia go?" asked Ari.

"She should have been there," Ari said.

"If not at the Heart, then in the room," Arika added

"You stupid Goblin!" Queen Diviva cried, scrambling away from the Witches binding her.

Arika pushed herself in front of her aunt. "Don't you dare go near Teaser! He's the only family we've ever had."

Ari grew a few inches taller. "To think I wanted to meet you. Now, I never want to see you again!"

Two High Guardsmen pulled the queen away from the twins, but her venom wasn't yet spent. "You've won nothing! Just wait. You'll lose it all. I'm the only one here who can control what's coming!"

The former queen continued to yell as the High Guardsmen pulled her out of the room. She continued to rave long after she was locked in a room far below the casino.

"Why does she look like that, Teaser?" asked Arika.

"She was very pretty when I first saw her," said Ari.

CC, who'd been leaning against the wall, stood. She held up something small in her hand. "This is what caused the damage to her face: Frank's bullet."

"Frank?" the twins asked at the same time.

“A friend,” said Teaser.

“A good cop,” said CC. “He saw your aunt attacking and shot his gun. Well,” she paused and looked at Teaser. “I assume that was it. Like I said, he was one of the good guys.”

Tears flowed fresh down Arika’s face. “He saved my life”

“All of us,” added Ari, who returned to normal size. “How many others?”

“How many had to die today?”

Teaser put one arm around the shoulders of each twin. “In protecting you, those who died have protected the Wildes, the Earth, and the Magic.”

Arika pushed away from Teaser, dashing to the other side of the orb as she caught sight of another familiar face. “Dianttha!”

Maël helped his daughter to stand.

“I’m fine,” she said, but wobbled.

“Back to the bed, Lady Dianttha,” Mandrake said, placing his arm under her shoulders. He bowed to Arika and Ari. “With your permission, I will return to those who need my skills.”

“Who’re you?” asked Arika.

“Our cousin,” said Ari. “Arika, this is Mandrake.”

“Cousin?” Arika’s tears stopped flowing in favor of a smile. She threw her arms around his neck. “I’m so glad to have family we don’t have to be afraid of.” She dropped her arms and turned to Ari, suddenly wary. “Right?”

“Yes,” said Ari. “He’s one of the good guys.”

Arika hugged him again. “Good. We have so much to learn. You’ll help us, won’t you?”

Teaser’s jaw fall open as Mandrake returned Arika’s hug. “I shall try to be a worthy, cousin.”

“Ol’Sassi?” asked Eugene.

Teaser turned to see Eugene standing in front of Ol'Sassi’s staff. It had grown a foot taller since it was planted, and near the top, a face, tiny but distinct, broke the surface of the staff.

Eugene put her forehead to the face’s. “Glad you’re back with us.

We fixed the magic, just like you said we would."

Teaser felt a soft, warm hand on his arm. An equally warm voice breathed, "I'm ready to go home."

"I know, CC." Teaser looked at her face as she gazed at the orb. "As soon as I am able, I will guide you home myself."

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CHAPTER II
New Meetings in Las Vegas

Isabella

Isabella sat on the stoning at top of the topmost point of the High Meadow Casino, staring at nothing—or perhaps everything. She listened to people and music, slot machines and automobiles, Wolves howling at the moon and Nighthawks surviving. She didn't hear Jonesy arrive until his feet gripped the stone next to her.

"You are most solitary since our friends returned from the Wildes," he said.

Isabella shrugged. "Busy."

They sat, not speaking, letting the cold night wind brush through their hair while fireworks exploded below them.

"A new era begins," said Jonesy.

"Yeah," said Issy.

"Cesar officially takes over the High Meadow Casino tonight," he said. "The fireworks were my idea for a double celebration."

Isabella looked into Jonesy's blue face and bulbous nose, turning red, pink, green, and navy in the flashes of fireworks. "Nice."

Jonesy wiggled his fingers, sending purple rockets flying in a circle so they'd crash together and explode into a purple-and-green dragon rippling over the Strip. Even high over the city, the "oohs" and "awes" of the spectators reached them.

"Of course," continued Jonesy, "my first objective tonight was to allow my charges a party, long promised but never given,

celebration of their birthing day."

"Figures the old Witch never let the kids have a party. They didn't even have toys. Now," she sighed, shifting to focus on the latest volley of fireworks. "Now, they're too old for toys."

"There is much they have missed." Jonesy nodded. "We wanted them to be children, but…restrained? I do not know what we did was right."

Isabella looked into Jonesy's face as she took his hands in hers. "The kids love you, Jonesy. You and Teaser been doing a great job. They're happy, and that's the most important thing."

Jonesy patted her hand and smiled at her. "I miss him, too."

Isabella let Jonesy put an arm around her. She sniffed fighting tears that threatened to fall, again. "My fault Frank died. I should have protected him better."

"He saw the evil queen attacking children. Would you not have risked your life to protect a child you did not know?"

Isabella sighed. "He was a good guy."

"Yes," agreed Jonesy. "I wish I had had more time with such a friend. They are rare."

The fireworks filled the sky with light in a final parade of splendor.

Isabella shook her head and stood. "I won't let anything happen to Marcus. Frankie loved that kid."

"He loved Marcus's sister, his wife, his wife's daughter, and you."

"But, I know Marcus," said Isabella. "Anyway, we've got a meeting to go to."

TEASER

"The fireworks were a nice touch," said Marcus, leaning on the balcony railing of the private meeting room on the third floor of the High Meadow Casino.

From the Strip, faces beamed with bursts of blues, golds, reds,

greens, and every color in between as crossettes, chrysanthemums, comets, and pearls followed one after the other, sometimes overlapping, but never stopping. Gasps erupted with glee at the sight of colorful waterfalls and multicolored, flying fish.

“We have those at home, too,” Dianttha said, joining Marcus at the railing. “We don’t get them often. The queen always complained they were frivolous, but I didn’t know humans could make them by mixing powders. That’s interesting.”

Marcus pointed as a red rocket exploded into a giant heart. “Teaser and Jonesy are making some of them.”

Dianttha’s face, awash in the red light, leaned a little closer to Marcus’s, who leaned a little closer to her. They gazed at each other, and their hands and cheeks almost touched.

Teaser, standing on the balcony above, pointed his nose toward the fireworks as he heard his friend approach.“Jonesy, is it time for the meeting?”

“Yes,” Jonesy said, although he was watching the couple below. “Cesar arrived before the fireworks started. He’s in the meeting room.” Looking down at Dianttha and Marcus, he smiled “To be so young again.”

“Not for all the gold in all the mines of all the worlds,” said Teaser. As he turned to walk away, he asked his friend, “Why so melancholy tonight?”

“I have been speaking with Isabella.” Jonesy said nothing else, but he didn’t need to.

“She’s only a child,” said Teaser as they made their way through the room full of students from St. Gaetano High School. “As are all these. Look there.”

He pointed to a far wall where Arika stood, hands on her hips, arguing with a boy with sandy blond hair. Their Goblin ears heard her voice rising over the music.

“You did not, Maverick!” exclaimed Arika.

“Did so,” replied Maverick with a smirk. “I went completely vegan for the whole summer. I’m going to keep it up.”

“It won’t change anything,” Arika retorted.

“One small change, Arika: that’s all that’s needed,” said Maverick. “At least I’m doing something.”

Arika folded her arms across her chest, but her lips quivered in a smile. “Want to really make a difference?”

Maverick mimicked her stance and stared at her.

“A protest,” said Arika, “signs and all, in front of the casino. What do you think?”

“It won’t make a difference,” Maverick said but he leaned closer to her. “All the same, if one person—”

“Exactly!” shouted Arika. “One small change.”

Maverick nodded in agreement, then in time with the music, he reached his out and touched the side of her head. “By the way, your hair looks good green.”

“Thanks,” Arika replied, forcing down a giggle. “It feels like me.”

“Want to dance?”

“Sure,” she said with another giggle.

Teaser harrumphed. “And you want to be young again.”

As they made their way to the exit, they passed Ari and a girl with long, dark curls.

“So that’s why you dyed your hair blue,” the girl said as if she’d discovered a worm in her sandwich.

“I like it,” Ari replied.

The girl wouldn’t turn her face toward Ari, but her eyes rolled up to look at his face. “We should always do what we think is best for ourselves. Self-expression is important.”

Ari waved to Teaser and Jonesy, but instead of calling to them, he reached his hand out to the girl. “Want to dance, Margie?”

Margie’s grin brightened her face more than the fireworks, and with the faintest of giggles, she said, “Okay.”

“No,” sighed Jonesy. “I do not wish to be so young again.”

CESAR SAT in an overstuffed chair at the round table in the center of a room bare except for the table, with nothing but the soft, glowing orb of Mother's Heart in its center. Other chairs surrounded the table, and thick green curtains covered the wall of windows. The dark walls hugged the room, providing those within a sense of healing and warmth.

Teaser could just make out Ramon and Isabella standing behind Cesar and just out of the light. Eugene sprawled her long legs in front of her in her chair next to Cesar, drinking from a bottle of water. Her face glowed with the peace and joy it always should have. Next to her, Phineas, leaning on his forearms, waved his fingers in front of the light, but did not touch it. Happy frowned as he looked at the orb and concentrated on that which he had never seen before.

Carnelian squatted on a stool so that his face would be even with the others. On a chair slightly in front of the stool, Ringleader Remie scowled at Dianttha, who sat next to him. Her hands were delicately placed on the table and she smiled at Remie, fully aware of the Goblin's distrust. Marcus sat next to her on her other side; his hands were on the table trying not to touch the orb or Dianttha's hands.

As Teaser and Jonesy took their seats, the door opened and CC rushed in. "Sorry I'm late." She plopped into the chair next to Cesar. "Plane was late."

Cesar turned his head only slightly. "Ralph and Simon wanted to come get you."

CC's smile disappeared, her eyes narrowed, and while she lowered her voice, everyone heard her reply. "Stop that! You had every vampire on the East Coast watching me—"

"I did not!" Cesar argued. "I may have asked an acquaintance or two to keep an eye out for—"

"Eight!" CC's face tightened. "I counted eight my first week. I can take care of myself."

"I know. I was just—"

“You’re just being the big boss man, again. I get it. Now stop it.”

Teaser saw Ramon shake his head and roll his eyes, while Eugene laughed out loud. Phineas grinned and looked away, but Dianttha stared at the two of them.

Jonesy touched Teaser’s arm. “What—?”

Teaser shook his head and whispered, “To be young again, you said.” Clearing his throat as loudly as he could, he raised his hand. “Perhaps we should begin.”

CC crossed her arms and said nothing.

Cesar nodded. “Please do.”

Dianttha

Carnelian pounded a fist on the table. “Ringleaders should be here! Incomplete.”

Teaser sighed, but it was CC who answered. “With the death of Ringleader Aurum and the betrayal of Queen Diviva and her High Coven, the new High Ring elected Arika and Ari as its heads. They also named Teaser as their spokesperson in this world. The High Ring speaks for them until the twins come of age in the Wildes.”

Cesar raised an eyebrow and looked at CC.

“I was there,” she said. “Humans are also in the High Ring now. No vamps—sorry, but you can’t get there.”

“Works for me,” replied Cesar. “Is there a High Ring here?”

Teaser grinned widely, and his eyes glowed with excitement. “This is it. Our Ringleaders suggested us as, to quote them both, ‘we’re just kids’. Ringleader Remi is here to speak for the Goblins of Earth.”

“What about Mandrake?” asked Eugene.

“Ah,” said Teaser. His smile did not quite vanish, but it was full of sympathy. “He declines. He fears his mother’s involvement with the former queen taints his reputation. He wishes only for success for this High Ring.”

“Ten’s unlucky for a Ring,” said Ringleader Remie.

“We count twelve Ringleaders, though two are young and do not attend,” said Jonesy.

“Another human, then?” asked Cesar.

“That would be the best choice,” said Teaser. As Ringleader Remie’s voice rumbled to object, he added, “To achieve balance, as they do in the Wildes.”

Dianttha, who’d been staring into Mother’s Heart, spoke up. “I suggest we seek a human of CC’s quality. Perhaps with all of us looking, we will find one.”

“Not likely,” muttered Cesar. He glanced at CC and smiled. Looking away, he continued. “Shirley will represent me when I can’t be here. She knows what to do.” As Jonesy started to grumble, Cesar added, “I’m heading back to Austin later tonight.”

“We’re heading back to Austin,” CC corrected.

“Didn’t want to be the big boss—”

“Good,” Teaser said, trying not to laugh. “Now to questions I have answers for.”

Jonesy cleared his throat. “Does anyone know what became of Mrs. Smith or her servant, Upwood?”

“He’s alive?” Happy and Phineas asked at the same time, both leaping to their feet and growling..

“We don’t know, Phin,” said Cesar.

Jonesy said, “I thought you might know. Shadows weaving with Mother’s Song is new to me.”

Teaser nodded. “As it is to most, if not us all. Do the Reds understand how the Shadows affect Mother’s Song?”

“Not heard of by Red.” Carnelian whispered in Remie’s ear, and Remie added, “Perhaps Ol’Sassie will tell the tale.”

CC leaned forward. “Is she speaking yet?”

Ringleader Remie shook his head. “Reds will spread the word when she wakes.”

Teaser sighed. “She can tell many tales.”

“We’ll look for Mrs. Smith in the Shadows,” said Cesar.

Phineas and Happy stared at each other until Happy nodded. “If

either are still in Vegas, we'll find them."

"They won't be here," said Phineas. "Don't ask me how I know," he quickly added when everyone turned to him at once. "I wouldn't be if I was Upwood, no matter how much I wanted to kill my brother's killer. Besides, I'd know if he were near."

"Damn." Eugene put her hand on her brother's. "You're going to look for him, aren't you?"

"Yes," he said. "I have to. No Wolf can be free as long as he is."

"They could both be dead, but," Teaser shrugged, "they also may not be on this world."

Eugene shook her head so fast Dianttha worried for her neck. "I can't go back to the Wildes to look. Sorry…I just can't."

"No one's going to, Eugene. I need you here," said CC. "In the meantime, there is another issue to deal with."

Dianttha felt her gasp before she heard it as CC took out a small box, unwrapped old, dirty linens wrapped around it, and placed it on the table in front of her.

"Fae stones." Dianttha gripped Marcus's hand so tightly her own fingers ached.

"What are they?" Marcus asked, stroking her tense fingers softly.

Dianttha felt blood rush to her face, but she didn't remove her hand from his.

"Don't touch them, CC," Teaser barely whispered.

Dianttha watched as the Werewolves each sniffed and shuddered, turning their heads away. Cesar, unlike the other vampires in the room, leaned forward to look at the box, then shrugged.

"What are they?"

"Power," Jonesy said, his eyes fixed on the box, until, like the Werewolves, he shuddered, then lowered his head and hid his eyes behind his hand.

"We discovered a Fae was working with the betrayers," said Teaser. "You discovered this, too, Cesar, when you aided Jonesy in closing the journal."

Dianttha felt an ache in her heart like the one she felt when she closed the journal in the Wildes. “They’re dangerous. I read once of an old witch who found Fae Stones. She grew very powerful—so powerful, a new coven formed just to destroy her.”

“Old tales,” said Teaser, “we have similar ones.”

“What do we do with them?” asked Cesar.

“Hide them,” said Teaser. “Hide them where no one may find them, not even you.”

Cesar opened his mouth to reply, but then nodded and handed CC a clean handkerchief. “I’ll give you whatever you need.”

CC wrapped the box first in the old, dirty linen, then wrapped them again in Cesar’s clean one. “Why don’t they tempt me? Is it because I can see what I see?”

Teaser shrugged. “Perhaps so, since you are so keen to rid yourself of them. They do not tempt you.”

“Nevertheless,” added Jonesy. “Use great caution. Never open the box. At least Lucrid placed them in a box spelled to protect himself from them.”

“Dragon fire,” Dianttha blurted out. The word popped into her head from some long ago tale, something from a book of tales for children. “I read it once. Dragon fire can destroy them.”

Jonesy hummed. “Dragons can destroy Fae. Perhaps they can indeed destroy Fae Stones, too. I recall now hearing old tales about Dragons and Fae.”

“When we get back to the Wildes, I’ll search for the book and anything else I can find.” Dianttha looked at Marcus and squeezed his hand, gently this time. “We won’t return to the Wildes until the twins have their…what’s the word? Christmas break?”

Marcus smiled. “That’s it. And Jonesy has a huge library here; we’ll look through it.”

Ramon whispered something in Cesar’s ear. Cesar looked up and said, “I’ll check out a line of interest regarding dragons.”

Teaser stood. “Hope that the first High Ring on this Earth would have only peace is dashed. Our first danger: Mrs. Smith and her

servant. The second danger: Fae."

Cesar stood, nodding to Teaser. "We'll face them all together. We've seen how strong we are when we are united."

The others stood, and CC tucked the small box into her pocket. "Never a dull moment with this crowd. I only ever wanted to help people. I'll continue doing so as long as you'll have me."

Almost everyone jumped as Jonesy clapped his hands together. "Good. Now, I promised my charges a party, and they are enjoying it. Let us celebrate our victories. Tonight is for joy. Tomorrow, we return to our fight."

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About L.K. Latham

L.K. Latham is a independent author of urban fantasy and science fiction. *Midnight Whispers,* her debut series, follows Vampires, Werewolves, Goblins, Witches, the occasional Dragon, and the Humans who work with them to ensure we're all safe when we step into the shadows. Her characters are strong and self-sufficient and aren't afraid to ask for help. When they do, they build the right team and get the job done, but they're not afraid to have a little fun along the way.

L.K. lives in Austin, Texas where, when she's not building new words, she reads, bakes, walks, and tests out the best wines and bourbons the state offers.

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